

**The
Motor Car
and
Politics
1896-1970**

**WILLIAM
PLOWDEN**

There are now over twelve million cars on British roads. By 1980 there will probably be twenty million. What to do about the private car is one of the most urgent problems facing British government.

But the car has been creating problems for governments ever since it first appeared on British roads, an expensive luxury owned by a privileged few. Dust, speed limits, police traps, the attitudes of magistrates and juries, taxation, petrol rationing, traffic congestion are only a few of the topics with which Ministers and their advisers have grappled, in the face of often strong public and group opinion. This book for the first time reveals how governments have dealt, or have failed to deal, with these problems. Drawing on a wide range of published and unpublished material, it traces the development of policy towards the car over the past seventy years, and throws some light on the confused situation of today.

But this is far more than a study of the motor car. In focussing on changing attitudes towards private motoring, as revealed in the Press, Cabinet discussions, departmental files, public enquiries and Parliamentary debates, it is an important contribution to social history. In examining the interactions of Westminster, Whitehall and public opinion in the light of these changing attitudes, it provides a unique case-study in British politics and government in the twentieth century.

William Plowden was born in 1935. He has been Lecturer in Government at the London School of Economics since 1965, after working on the *Economist* and spending five years in the Civil Service. He owns a car and finds it indispensable.

Jacket by MICHAEL HARVEY

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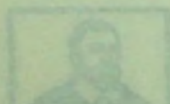
WILLIAM PLOWDEN
THE MOTOR CAR
AND POLITICS

1896-1970



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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used throughout the book:

AA	Automobile Association
(R)AC	(Royal) Automobile Club
BRF	British Roads Federation
CMUA	Commercial Motor Users' Association
LGB	Local Government Board
LGOC	London General Omnibus Company
MLC	Motor Legislation Committee
MU	Motor Union
RIA	Roads Improvement Association
RSAC	Royal Scottish Automobile Club
SMMT	Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders

INTRODUCTION

This study originated one morning as I stood at a bus-stop in South London, watching my bus wedged a quarter of a mile down the road in a solid block of traffic made up mainly of private cars carrying one or two passengers. I wondered then how we had got into a situation in which it was apparently possible for the users of private cars, without serious question, to dictate the pattern of traffic to every other road-user, and to maximise their own comfort and convenience at the expense of the vast majority travelling by other means.

These were not original thoughts, least of all for a frustrated bus passenger. But they led me to wonder, by way of further speculation about the existence and influence of a 'motor lobby', what the political realities of the situation were, and how they had developed. Was it simply that government had capitulated to the car? If so, when had this happened? There is no need to dwell here on the place of the car in modern society: its roles as liberator, individualiser, consumer durable, creator of wealth and employment, export, phallic symbol. All these aspects of it have been discussed in an extensive (and mostly rather indifferent) literature. But very little has been written about how governments, who from the beginning have had the tasks of protecting the citizen from the motorist (and sometimes the motorist from the citizen) and later of providing the roads for cars to use, and later still of regulating the economic environment in which cars can be produced, have reacted to the car. I knew that the early Edwardian motorists, as portrayed by Kipling or personified by Kenneth Grahame's Mr Toad, had been not only a minority, but an unpopular minority, and had been treated accordingly, at least in the courts. Had there come a moment at which the numbers of motorists had grown so great that politicians had no longer dared to offend them by trying to keep them in check? Or was it that the general public had eventually become indifferent to the motor car, with the result that the motorists were able to persuade the politicians to remove existing restrictions? Or was it misleading in either case to concentrate on the politicians: was this

an area in which policy had been made by civil servants, perhaps for administrative rather than political reasons, and then pressed successfully on their masters?

These rather simple questions were the starting-point for an enquiry into the changing ways in which governments have reacted to the motor car since it first ran on British roads in the mid-1890s and have dealt with the problems which it created. There have been plenty of problems, from the earliest days: dust, speed, accidents, noise, police action and attempts to evade it, traffic congestion, the attitudes of magistrates and juries. How severe these problems have been, in political terms, has naturally always been a function of public attitudes to the private car: the general hostility to the first cars led to sometimes almost hysterical reactions to quite minor incidents, and in turn to demands for government action which Ministers thought it unwise to ignore. At the same time, the attitudes of Ministers and civil servants are equally relevant. It has sometimes been suggested that not only the Labour party, but also many civil servants (assumed to be temperamentally some kind of paler Fabians) have been hostile towards the private car, whether as a symbol of conspicuous consumption or as part of the machinery of privilege which gave the Conservatives a built-in advantage at the polls, or perhaps as giving an unwelcome individual mobility to the urban proletariat. If this were true, it would obviously be important in determining how far Treasury officials, or a Labour party conference, would respond to public demands to curb the car.

There are several ways of trying to gauge attitudes to the car (or to anything else). The most obvious is what is said about it, in public or in private. Members of the government, and MPs and other spokesmen for the public, reveal something of their feelings in speeches in Parliament and in the country. But with a judicious eye on their likely audience they naturally do not always say exactly what they think. More revealing is private discussion of official policy, as recorded in the records of Cabinet meetings and in letters and minutes on departmental files (although obviously here too the tone and content of even the most confidential communication will depend on the sender's assessment of the receiver). Official views are most unambiguously expressed in policy. The motor car is here a good subject. For a start, attempts have always been made to limit the ways in which it is used by means of criminal sanctions; at least a crude quantitative index of changing views about

INTRODUCTION

the car is provided by a government proposal to, say, raise a minimum penalty for a motoring offence from £10 to £20, or in a series of speeches from the back benches criticising the proposal. How these sanctions are in fact applied by the courts is even more suggestive, of the views of one group at least; the relationship between actual penalties and the available maxima will tell one something about the Bench's opinions of the seriousness of the crime in question. This certainly seems to be so in the case of the motor car. At the back of this volume is a table* showing the average penalties for several common offences in the early 1900s and for the years between 1928 and 1968; what shows up most clearly is the decline in average penalties in the first half of the period, and (when converted into constant prices) their resolute refusal to rise in the second half despite all the attempts of Ministers of Transport and Lords Chief Justice.

The motor car is a good subject, secondly, because it has always been taxed. Governments wishing to increase taxation (and sometimes when decreasing it) are usually forced to offer some sort of explanation; the many changes in protective tariffs, licence duty, petrol duty, purchase tax and hire purchase restrictions on the car have almost always been accompanied by ministerial attempts to justify them, in the face of criticism. Thus Asquith in 1907, suggesting that a motor car tax would be "almost an ideal tax, because it is a tax on a luxury which is apt to degenerate into a nuisance . . ."; or the reply which motorists have given, from that day to this, that the car has become a necessity, and a "tool of business", and should be taxed accordingly. In addition, comparative tax rates give some idea of how policy-makers rank different activities: thus the Select Committee on Luxury Taxation, in 1918, grouped motor cars for tax purposes together with fans, boas, billiard tables, cocktails and yachts. The most famous episodes in motor taxation history were focused on none of the activities mentioned above; Churchill's 'raids on the Road Fund' in 1926-8 were a deliberate abandonment of what the motorists had regarded as a firm bargain between themselves and the government, and the attempts to justify the raids consisted mainly of elaborate attacks by Churchill and his officials in the Treasury on motoring as a luxury quite incompatible with economic crisis.

The motor car is a good subject, lastly, because it has never been

* Appendix A.

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possible to ignore it. When there were only a handful of cars, they were not only novelties, but also raised so much dust, frightened so many horses and outraged so many traditionalists that they attracted a disproportionate amount of attention. When, in the 1930s, their numbers had grown, but to nothing like current levels, they killed and injured so many people on the roads that the casualty rate was one of the topics of the age. In 1970, with over eleven million of them on the roads, they are everywhere inescapable.

* * * * *

The framework of this study is a simple one. In the early 1900s there were only a few thousand cars in Britain (16,000 in 1905). They were vastly outnumbered by horses, partly because they were a tricky new invention, partly because they were very expensive – at today's prices, anything from £1,500 upwards. 'Motoring' was thus mainly a leisure occupation for a section of the moneyed *élite*, who made themselves unpopular both among those who could not afford a car and among those who thought that no gentleman should be seen in one. A few people – mainly motorists themselves – were killed or injured by cars, but in general they were regarded as more inconvenient than dangerous.

Today there are in Britain nearly a thousand times as many cars as there were in 1905, and there will probably be twenty million or more by the end of the decade. Most people either own cars, or expect, or hope to own them; this is relatively easy, in that second-hand ones in particular have become very cheap compared with other goods and services. There are two and a half times as many private cars on the roads as all other vehicles put together; many people's jobs depend on owning one of them. Responsible commentators increasingly often say things like, "General elections from now on will be decided by 'the motorists' vote"* , or utter the threatening phrase, "a car-owning democracy". In 1969 7,400 people were killed and 346,000 injured on the roads.

In the seventy-odd years of motoring in Britain, it is obvious that both society and the role of the car have changed greatly. This study aims to examine the relationship between these two sets of changes, and, first, to show broadly how the car as such has been treated. (What have been the developments in speed limit policy? How have the courts treated motoring offenders? Does British government have a

* Harold Wincott, 1963.

INTRODUCTION

'motor-car policy'?) Secondly, it poses the question: do changes in attitudes to the car and its use help to illuminate more general changes in British society? (One of the main political criticisms of motorists in the early 1900s was that by their callous behaviour they were fomenting class warfare, as well as setting country against town. The world has altered, a little, since a motoring spokesman could publicly tell a Royal Commission in 1929 that compulsory insurance would interfere with the liberty of the subject, because "insurance is voluntary, and there are some people who object to insurance in principle".) Thirdly, it takes the motor car as providing a continuous thread through the labyrinth of the policy-making process and tries to see in what ways its treatment illustrates the nature of British politics and government in the twentieth century. What, in this context, have been at different periods the activities and relative influence of Ministers, civil servants, the official Opposition, Parliament, organised interests, opinion at large?

In some cases the ways in which problems raised by the car have been handled still impinge on current policy – for instance, the creation of the Road Fund, and the Treasury's later well-planned raids on it. Others are now long-forgotten, and of no intrinsic importance. But sometimes the most trivial topics – such as tail-lights for farm carts and bicycles – most neatly illuminate facets of policy-making at a particular moment: the attention paid to certain organised interests, or the ability of officials to sway Ministers. One episode in particular (the arguments between 1920 and 1947 about the 'horsepower' tax and its effects) has always been portrayed as a classic failure by the civil service to understand the problems of industry. In fact, like many such episodes then and since, it is a story of stalemate, in which neither side would make a move and each blamed the other. But the industry's account prevailed, partly because it is generally easier to blame government, partly because the government never troubled to argue its case in reply.

Given the nature of the material available, the book falls into two distinct parts. Up till the end of 1939 it is possible to go a little way behind the public front of the policy-making process by examining the official documents now opened under the thirty-year rule. After 1939 one must make do mainly with published material, shored up with fragments from diaries, personal interviews, and so on. This part of the story will need to be filled out and where necessary re-written later on. But it is relevant to the first part, and I think worth

adding to it, partly because it draws together material which may not all be familiar, partly because in my view policy in this field (as in many others) is shaped by the policies and attitudes of the immediate past, and unless looked at in their context is much harder to understand.

One disclaimer may be necessary. This is *not* a study of the impact of the car on society (which still remains to be written, though Colin Buchanan showed the way with *Mixed Blessing* over ten years ago). If anything, it is the reverse. It is concerned with the way society has treated the car; it deals with the kinds of argument that have been used in the making of public policy towards the car, and with the kind of policy which such arguments (and other factors) have helped to produce. There are obviously some activities which specifically relate to the private car: arguments about parking meters, for instance, or about the 70 mph speed limit, or almost the whole discussion of 'motors' in the early 1900s when there were few other motor vehicles on the road. Equally obviously, there are some fields in which the private motorist is only one of several interested parties: for instance, the building and administration of roads. In both cases, my main interest has been in the arguments in each context which have revolved round the private car as such. I have not attempted to look in detail at the roads programme, still less at the administration of roads; nor for instance at the developments in motor insurance and in government regulation thereof, once the *principle* had been supported by the Royal Commission of Transport in 1929 and given practical shape in the Road Traffic Bill the same year. For much the same reason I have not touched on developments in the motor industry except where they seem relevant to the making of motor-car policy, nor in general on subjects such as developments in town planning (already excellently covered in this context in Goss and Tetlow's *Homes, Towns and Traffic*), traffic control, government relations with the oil industry, or transport policy as a whole.

It may be objected that if these subjects are left uncovered my central topic is non-existent, since it consists in effect only of an area where they all overlap: in short, that there are subjects called 'road transport' or 'motor transport', or 'roads', or 'traffic', but that 'the motor car' is a meaningless abstraction. There is a real problem here. Of course it is difficult to tell, for instance, how far the roads programme, or action to cut down road accidents, are

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'about' cars rather than other sorts of traffic. This kind of ambiguity may be hard to resolve. Nonetheless, there is at the other extreme a core of activities which clearly are centred on the private car: most individuals own, cherish and drive not heavy trucks, but private cars; in arguments about the tax burden on 'the motorist' nobody is talking about the bus operators; attempts to control city centre parking are not aimed at taxis; when thousands of people sign petitions organised by the RAC or the AA they are signing as private motorists. I believe that it is meaningful to isolate attitudes and policies concerned with the private car as such. Anyway, that is what this book attempts to do.

PART ONE

From 1896 to the Motor Car Act, 1904

In February of 1896, the Government's government introduced a Bill to the House of Commons to regulate the use of "motor vehicles" on public roads in the country. This was done by extending the existing regulations, laid down in the Highway and Locomotives Act of 1896, that any person or vehicle using the public roads should be provided by a person or firm who should permit them to use a road, for a fee. The government showed no particular haste in this piece of legislation introducing it in the House of Commons in the House of Commons. The point that it was a Bill brought in by the Local Government Board, and a legacy from the late Liberal government. Although he had no doubt that there was "no better time" in the country, that a Bill of the kind should be passed, he was added that the L.G.B. themselves admitted that they had carried the Bill in the House of Commons, and that the House of Commons was "wasting" the fact that they had no objection to their "motor vehicles". For all that, Stansfield, the government believed the Bill should be introduced to encourage the introduction and use of motor vehicles. But, creating himself yet again, he decided to suppress the government's decision to consider any amendments that might be proposed.

The style in which the Bill was introduced was to be typical of motor car legislation for many years to come. It was a well-considered, and the legislation was the government, and an effort was made to take action but were willing, after things being said, or other details interests which did want something done. When the Bill was introduced in the House of Commons by Henry Chaplin, President of the L.G.B., he was much the same man.

The government were "perfectly open and anxious to consider any suggestions which might be made that any portion of the House, by those conversant with the subject, and which might be

I

GENTLEMEN OF EDUCATION AND POSITION

From 1896 to the Motor Car Act, 1903

In the spring of 1896, the Conservative government introduced a Bill in the House of Lords to make possible the use of "light locomotives" on public roads in this country. This it did by abolishing the crippling requirements, laid down in the Highways and Locomotives Act of 1878, that any mechanical vehicle using the public roads should be preceded by a man on foot and should go not faster than 4 miles per hour. The government showed no particular pride in this piece of legislation; introducing it in the Lords,¹ Lord Harris at the outset made the point that it was a Bill brought in by the Local Government Board, and a legacy from the late Liberal government. Although he had no doubt that there was "an earnest desire in the country that a Bill of the kind should be passed", he swiftly added that the LGB themselves admitted that they had drafted the Bill in the dark as to what were the best provisions to put into it, "owing to the fact that they had no experience of these light locomotives". For all that, Harris added, the government believed the Bill should be adequate to encourage the manufacturers and users of motor vehicles. But, covering himself yet again, he finished by expressing the government's readiness to consider any amendments that might be proposed.

The style in which the Bill was introduced was to be typical of motor-car legislation for many years to come: an air of mild detachment, and the implication that the government had no great desire to take action but were willing, other things being equal, to oblige certain interests which did want something done. When the Bill was introduced in the House of Commons by Henry Chaplin, President of the LGB, he took much the same line.²

The government were "perfectly open and anxious to consider any suggestions which might be made from any quarter of the House, by those conversant with the subject, and which might tend

to improve the character of the measure". Boldly, he speculated about the future. The Bill would "undoubtedly develop a very great and, having regard to their experience with bicycles, quite possibly an enormous trade, and give a vast amount of employment . . . (Hear, hear.) . . . It was even possible that these motor cars might become a rival to light railways (Laughter)." They would also help farmers transport their products. It was objected by other speakers that motor vehicles would damage the roads, would ruin the horse-breeding industry, and would be of no value to the poor farmer because of their vast expense, although one declared plainly that "there was in the future a vast industry in auto motor cars, and the least we ought to do was to give it a fair chance".

In committee the government, as they had promised, accepted various amendments to the Bill³: to require light locomotives to carry lights at night, and a "bell or other instrument capable of giving audible and sufficient warning"; to limit their maximum speed on public roads to 14 mph or any less speed prescribed by the LGB: to require them to pay an annual excise duty of two or three guineas. (The government rejected both the argument that "the men who were making this start were public benefactors, and ought not, therefore, to be taxed so highly", and the suggestion that the tax revenue should be distributed to local authorities according to their rateable value, thus giving each an income proportionate to the damage done by cars to its roads.) The Bill passed through all its stages without controversy, and came into force, as the Locomotives on Highways Act, on 14 November, 1896.

* * * * *

It was not surprising that in 1896 the LGB knew little about motor cars. The Locomotive Act of 1865 had imposed limits of 4 mph in open country, and 2 mph in towns, on all road locomotives, and required them to be attended by at least three persons. One of these attendants was to walk ahead of the vehicle, carrying a red flag by day, a red lantern by night. These requirements had been modified in 1878; the Highways and Locomotives Act left the carrying of the red flag optional to the local authorities, and reduced the distance by which the flag man had to precede the vehicle from sixty yards to twenty. These and other conditions made it hard enough to operate steam traction engines on the public roads; light motor cars, which by the 1890s were capable of *averaging* 15 mph over long

distances, were clearly out of the question. Only in the 1890s did the first motor enthusiasts, inspired by developments on the continent, insist on importing and in some cases using motor cars on the public roads.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, British roads were probably as peaceful as they have ever been. The great days of long-distance passenger and goods transport by horse and horsed road vehicles had been ended for ever by the coming of the railways. The Webbs, almost poetically, described some aspects of this change:

The tramping herds of cattle, sheep and pigs, together with the myriads of geese and turkeys, were carried by railway train; the packhorses passed silently away; gentlemen and commercial travellers alike ceased to travel on horseback; the ox-team died out and the dog-drawn vehicle was prohibited by law.⁴

The turnpike trusts, some of which had earlier made fortunes for their shareholders, drifted into insolvency; in 1864 a Commons Select Committee recommended that they should be abolished, and the last of them folded up in 1895. It had been the lone survivor of a change which had taken place some time before, and very rapidly. In the earlier chapters of Thackeray's *Pendennis* heroes in a hurry go by coach; in the later chapters they take the mail train. By mid-century, indeed, most journeys of any length were made by train. The roads were left to the poor, vagrants, local travellers and short-haul carriers.

Roads were in every way suited to the leisurely pace of the horse. It was not simply that they were unsignposted (signs would have been superfluous for travellers who either could not read or were within a dozen miles of home), that dogs and chickens scratched and dozed in them, or – as the Webbs described it – that they had

a more or less rough or irregular, a more or less yielding or gravelly surface, formed of imperfectly consolidated broken stone, in which the horse's hoof could find, alike in wet weather and dry, in summer heat and winter's frost, a firm foothold.⁵

Their administration, too, was suited, as it had always been, to the pace and range of the horse: to the fact that most road journeys would be made within the county, if not within the parish, and that by far the easiest way to get out of a large city was to go by train. For most of the nineteenth century the basic unit of highway adminis-

tration was the parish. The reform of this fragmented system started in the 1870s; by the middle of the 1890s the responsibility for roads was divided among some 1,800 county, borough, urban and rural councils, compared with at least 15,000 separate authorities sixty years before.

Roads were not seen as the concern of the central government. There was only indirect central control over roads, exercised by the Local Government Board which had been created in 1872 and had taken over from the Home Office the task of supervising all the activities of local authorities, including the roads. 'Responsibility' for roads of course meant finance, and in an age when the main users of roads were the local ratepayers there was both logic and justice in tying the upkeep to the rates. The consequence of treating roads as a local affair were wide variations in standards of road-building and maintenance from area to area, and the inefficiency which followed from fragmented administration.

In the last twenty years of the nineteenth century the peace of many roads was suddenly disturbed by the rapid development of the bicycle. Fitted with pneumatic tyres in the 1880s, the bicycle became the centre of a mass recreation. Thousands of cyclists poured out of the cities, especially London, at weekends. For the first time since the rise of the railways the roads were crowded with through traffic; and, for perhaps the first time ever, the idea was born of travelling by road for pleasure. The pleasure would have been greater had through travelling been easier; the cyclists found, with disgust, that a road system and road surfaces that suited the horse were less appropriate for the touring cyclist. The Cyclists' Touring Club and National Cyclists' Union were both founded in 1878; in 1886 they jointly set up the Roads Improvement Association to press for better administered and better kept roads.

The cyclists, working through the RIA, did not have much success in persuading the authorities to take action. The conditions for success were not yet there. Cyclists were a nuisance to some, a terror to others; in November 1896 the Duke of Cambridge sent on to the Home Secretary a letter from his brother, the Duke of Teck, complaining about cyclists in Richmond Park:

... We had a very curious experience yesterday. . . . About 2,000 to 3,000 Bicycles through the Roads of the Park, not as if guided by sensible thoughtful People, but by Maniacs, Persons in a state of

madness. They went about in a pace like Lightning, [*sic*], looking neither right nor left. . . . Many Groups, actually abreast, of from 10 to 20 or more, formed of Roughts and others apparently of members of Bicycle Clubs. . . .⁶

Cyclists offended even some less sensitive than the Victorian royal family; there was considerable police persecution of them, especially in Surrey. But they could not really be said to be dangerous. And, as Teck's letter brought out, they were far from respectable, i.e. influential. For both these reasons, as the Webbs (themselves, like many of the early Fabians, considerable cyclists) drily noted, the humble cyclist needed more than mere organisation to give his complaints any political weight. "Even when by the end of the century", they commented, "the bicycle was to be found in every country house, and many a highway had more bicyclists than horse-drawn vehicles, the new users of the roads had still only the smallest possible influence on their administration."⁷

It took the motor car, more frightening, inconvenient and dangerous than the bicycle, and owned by people of considerably higher social status, to produce any action.

The first cars appeared on British roads in the mid-90s; the first commercial undertakings, and the first motorists' clubs, were organised very shortly after. The pioneers among amateur motorists are usually taken to include characters such as Evelyn Ellis, who imported several cars before 1896 and deliberately courted the attentions of the police by driving through Windsor at well over the statutory 4 mph, and, above all, Sir David Salomons. Salomons, a member of a prominent Anglo-Jewish family and a distinguished electrical and mechanical engineer, was also one of the first British motorists. In 1895 he was Mayor of Tunbridge Wells, where in October of that year he organised the first public motor show in England (himself driving his own imported Peugeot). Such interest was shown in the show that Salomons and others were convinced that the time had come to press for a change in the law, to allow cars to be used on public roads. The government showed no signs of taking action, and in December 1895 Salomons founded what was arguably the first of the motoring organisations, the Self-Propelled Traffic Association ("to deal with a subject which closely affects agriculture, trade, and private interests").⁸

At the foundation meeting of the SPTA an argument broke out

which was to recur, in various forms, throughout the early 1900s – and which can still be heard over seventy years later. It concerned the attitude of the Association to the commercial aspects of the car. Salomons himself concisely described what happened:

An attempt was made by many gentlemen to be placed upon the Council, to whom Sir David objected, on the ground that it was their wish to make the Association little more or less than a Company promoting concern. As he had no interest financially in the movement nor any desire to take such a part in the future Sir David resented such tactics, and the result was a division in the camp, the Company promotion section separating themselves from those who were anxious solely to forward the movement for the good of their countrymen and of English industry.⁹

The company promoters were indeed keenly interested in the profitable future of the motor car, and by this time were already engaged in some complex and in some cases disreputable speculations. Most notorious was Harry J. Lawson, a bicycle manufacturer, financier and company promoter, who in 1895 set up the British Motor Syndicate Ltd., and in the following two years constructed an elaborate pyramid of companies on the basis of the Daimler agency and manufacturing rights, bought by the syndicate at the end of 1895. Most of Lawson's companies were either never seriously intended to undertake manufacture at all, or acted simply as importing and distribution agencies for continental cars, sometimes thinly disguised to give them a British flavour. As historians of the motor industry have pointed out, the effect of Lawson's success in raising capital for at best unproductive, at worst simply fraudulent undertakings was to give the British motor industry, in its first few years of life, an aura of disreputability which made it difficult for genuine manufacturers to raise the money they needed.¹⁰

However, Lawson's talent for publicity and for promotion was a real one. Towards the end of 1895 he founded the Motor Car Club ("a Society for the Protection, Encouragement and Development of the Motor Car Industry"). In February 1896 the Club held a reception at the Imperial Institute, to foreshadow an exhibition of motor cars to be held there in May. The exhibition was a triumphant success, being visited by the Prince of Wales and other members of the royal family, and completely eclipsed the rival show held a week before by the S P T A.

It may have been Lawson's activities that helped to persuade the government that the car had a future. At their first meeting the SPTA had decided to send a deputation to Henry Chaplin, the President of the LGB, to press for the repeal of the 1878 Act.¹¹ Led by Salomons, they called on him the following spring. He assured them of his sympathy. Motor cars, he thought, had the advantage over light railways that they could go straight to the door of every farmer in the country. He assured the Association that a Bill to amend the existing law was already in an advanced stage, and that he expected it to go through "without any formidable opposition".¹² This was more even than the SPTA had hoped for. Salomons wrote: "... To Sir David's astonishment ... it was the first occasion that Mr. Chaplin had stated that it was his intention to introduce a Bill."^{13*}

Whatever Lawson's influence on the introduction of the Bill, the sober authority of the SPTA secured for the Association, and for Salomons in particular, a position of extraordinary authority during the discussions of the Bill's details. It is often assumed that the close association of organised interests with policy-making is a feature peculiar to modern government; in this case the government, having decided to repeal the old speed limit and having introduced an extremely simple Bill to do this, turned for advice on how to fill out the details to Salomons, as a responsible and – as he continually insisted – a disinterested expert on the motor car. From this moment on he was treated as a kind of unofficial policy adviser. He was kept informed of progress; at the end of June, the day before the Commons second reading, Cumming Macdonald MP wrote to him:

I have just had a long chat with Mr Chaplin. . . . He tells me he is most anxious to expedite the passage of the Bill, and will do all in his power to carry it into law at once, and that he is prepared to use every effort at his disposal to carry it into effect. The matter has been discussed most keenly in the Cabinet, and all are unanimous to further its progress.¹⁴

Chaplin himself wrote a few days later that he would be glad to receive any suggestions that Salomons might make.¹⁵ However, the

* In the light of Lord Harris's remarks (see p. 21), it seems reasonable to suppose that Chaplin had found a Bill already in draft when the Conservatives replaced the Liberals in June 1895, and had only recently got round to deciding to adopt it.

same day Salomons was courteously informed by Chaplin's Parliamentary Secretary, Russell, that "it is necessary to have regard to the representations of the highway authorities, as well as to the views of those interested in the use of these motors".¹⁶ It was a warning that the motorists should not expect to have their way on every point; it was to be extremely relevant in the coming years.

Salomons sent the LGB a long memorandum about the Bill shortly afterwards. After making various detailed points, he argued generally that motor cars should be allowed as much freedom as possible; since technical experience was lacking, there was little danger of "a sudden and gigantic development of light locomotives. . . . It may take some years before a really sound system of road locomotion comes into force. . . . A large number of what I may term *motor toys* will appear on the roads, but I venture to predict that no type extant at this moment will survive in a practical country like England, possessed of so many first-class engineers and great industrial establishments."¹⁷

The government did not in fact greatly alter the Bill, although, as already seen, they showed themselves very willing to accept amendments put forward during the debates. Salomons and the motorists were well pleased with the outcome. At last it was possible to use motor cars on public roads. Salomons sent an effusive letter to the press:

Probably at no period in the history of the English legislature has so liberal a measure been passed.

For the great freedom given in this measure I feel that I am in a large way responsible.

Mr Chaplin and the officials connected with the Local Government Board and the Home Office, have accepted the various points which I pressed forward in person and in writing as well as the amendments which were finally adopted in Committee on Mr Chaplin's recommendation, also those which were not opposed by him at the committee.

Salomons went on, in words which were to become all too familiar in the mouths of the moderate spokesmen for the motorists, to appeal to motor-owners not to abuse the freedom given them by the Act:

It behoves everyone concerned, to act with prudence and consideration, to do nothing which might injure the roads, to use every care not to frighten horses, nor to store dangerous liquids thought-

lessly . . . but to act with discretion so that it shall not be said in a year or two hence, that the freedom now given had been too great and that another Act must be demanded to control the reprehensible conduct of those who may misuse their privileges.¹⁸

Salomons' own part in the Bill was not over; Chaplin wrote to him at the end of August referring to the next task, that of drafting regulations under the Act. He concluded that he hoped "with the assistance of practical men like yourself and others to be able to frame regulations which are effective and really useful".¹⁹ A few days later one of his officials, Major Tulloch, followed this up with a humble request for "an hour of your valuable time" to discuss the regulations.²⁰

Tulloch and Salomons corresponded throughout the autumn; Salomons sent Tulloch lists of detailed points, while Tulloch replied thanking him for his "disinterested trouble" and assuring him that the general public would owe him a debt of which they would never be fully aware. They visited Paris together, to observe motor cars in action. (Tulloch wrote: "I did enjoy my visit to Paris, but I feel that I owe you a debt that I shall never be able to repay.") But again – and this is perhaps the common factor which runs through such consultations from the late nineteenth century to the present day – Tulloch's effusions masked the fact that many of Salomon's suggestions were not accepted.

The regulations came into force, with the Bill, in November. They went a good deal further than the Bill. Drivers were variously required not to drive faster than was reasonable and proper, having regard to the traffic on the highway, and in no circumstances faster than 12 mph; not to cause their vehicles "to travel backwards for a greater distance or time than may be requisite for the purposes of safety"; to keep to the left when meeting any carriage, horse or cattle, and to the right when overtaking them; not to obstruct the highway: and "on the request of any police constable, or of any person having charge of a restive horse, or on any such constable or person putting up his hand as a signal for that purpose, cause the light locomotive to stop and to remain stationary so long as may be reasonably necessary". There was much scope here for flexible interpretation, and in the next few years full use was made of this.

Despite all the work done by Salomons on the Bill (incurring, as he pointed out at the time, "an expenditure reaching many thousands of pounds"),²¹ it was the 'company promoters' who first

exploited the change in the law which the SPTA had made possible. The occasion was Harry Lawson's Brighton Run of November 1896. The first run was discussed in what is perhaps the earliest surviving governmental file on the subject of motor cars²²; and it is characteristic of Lawson's methods of working that it was discussed in an atmosphere of doubt and mistrust.

The new Act was due to come into force on November 14, 1896. In October the Chief Constable of Sussex forwarded to the Home Office a letter which he had received from Lawson's Motor Car Club. The Club announced that "to give the officials of the Local Government Board engaged in framing the rules governing motor traffic and representatives of public bodies a practical demonstration of the capabilities and characteristics of the new vehicle" they were organising an experimental run of motor vehicles from London to Brighton on October 24. This had been agreed to by the Metropolitan Police and the LCC. The Club hoped that the Sussex police would place no obstacles in the run's way. The Chief Constable asked the Home Office for advice on how to reply, adding that he was personally in favour of a demonstration of motors.

The Home Office referred the matter to the Metropolitan Police. The police replied that it was quite untrue to say that they had agreed to the run. The LCC had agreed, but had pointed out to the Club that police permission was also necessary; this had not been sought. The police added:

Considering, however, that the new Act will come into force on the 14th of next month; that the Local Government Board are not desirous of having a display of Auto-Motor cars, as represented; and that I have very good reason to know that if the permission asked for by the Motor Car Club be granted similar applications will at once be made by others who are interested in various classes of Motor Carriage, I am of the opinion that no facilities for such an exhibition should be afforded by the Metropolitan Police.

On the basis of this advice, the Home Office then wrote, unhelpfully, to the Chief Constable of Sussex telling him to exercise his own discretion in replying to the Club. Sussex were persuaded to allow the "display", but others were not. Despite the care taken by the organisers to conduct the whole affair with decorum (participants were advised that "motor cars are on their trial in England, and that any rashness or carelessness might imperil the industry in this

country”), the Surrey police refused to allow the demonstration to anticipate the law.²³ It had to be postponed till the day the Act came into force. It was an ominous warning that the Surrey police, who had been notably active against the cyclists, were not likely to be more tolerant of motorists.

Lawson's interests in the motor car were mainly commercial; the Motor Car Club was in effect a promotional organisation for his other undertakings. With the passage of the 1896 Act, and the more widespread use of cars, motorists came to feel the need for some non-commercial organisation for the active promotion of motoring. Salomons' SPTA seems to have been widely regarded as not vigorous enough. In July 1897 the Automobile Club was founded by Frederick Simms (a co-founder and vice-president of the Motor Car Club) and C. Harrington Moore (the Motor Car Club secretary). Its aims were “the protection, encouragement and development of automobilism”; these were to be achieved by distributing information, organising exhibitions, races, competitions and lectures, and by generally protecting and encouraging the motor industry. But it was to be “essentially a Members' Club”, and “conducted independently of any personal interest”.²⁴ At its first meeting the AC had 163 members; by the end of the next year (in which the Club merged with the SPTA), there were 380 and by 1900 there were 710.²⁵

But by 1900 motorists were in serious difficulties. The 1896 Act had set the speed limit on open roads at 14 mph, or less than this as the LGB might decide. The LGB had decided on 12 mph. Ellis had driven through Windsor at speeds higher than this before 1896, and the swift development of automobile technology in these years made this limit quite unrealistic almost at once.

There was also a steady increase in the numbers of cars in use, as the AC membership figures suggest. From these two facts two things followed. The first, and by far the most significant, was the damage done to the roads, and the inconvenience caused to other road-users, by the motor car. The second, which followed partly from the first, was a vigorous though variable campaign of police action against motorists. Like the cyclists, the motorists reintroduced the idea of through traffic. Not since the great days of the stage coaches had country districts seen so much traffic merely passing through on its way somewhere else. But the car was more dangerous than the bicycle, it did more damage to the roads – which meant in

turn that it produced more dust – and unlike the bicycle it was ubiquitous (by 1905 the journey from London to Bath and back was a popular day trip).²⁶ Owners, riders and lovers of horses also found the car offensive. All these factors underlay the openly anti-motoring bias of various magistrates soon to be notorious; and motorists, although they necessarily came from a different economic class from the mass of cyclists, probably to some extent inherited the social prejudice which had been directed against cyclists – the “cads on casters” – as well as the apparatus of law enforcement which had been set up to catch them.²⁷

It has been suggested that motorists were more harshly treated by police and magistrates in areas, such as the rural south, where justices were more often members of the traditional ruling class who resented the pretensions of the oil-stained motorists to membership of the ‘carriage class’, and that in the industrial north, where magistrates were more often businessmen, the motorists’ status as engineers secured milder treatment.²⁸ This attractive theory is hardly borne out by the facts. Although there were one or two notorious Benches in the south (such as Andover, or Guildford), the distribution of police activity and of severe penalties seems on the whole to have been entirely random. It is true that in 1904/5, for instance, more motorists were fined in Sussex and Surrey than in any other county except London, and were fined more heavily than in most (399 and 380, and averages of £5 and £3 respectively). But these counties were exceptional. In industrial Cheshire, Lancashire and West Riding 186, 194 and 149 motorists were fined; in rural Oxfordshire, Wiltshire and Suffolk 19, 7 and 7. In all six of these the average fine was between about one and two pounds.²⁹ The evidence from Surrey and Sussex suggests that, as a motive for prosecuting and punishing motorists, class-consciousness was less powerful than the desire of areas with roads much travelled by cars to recoup some of their expenses (and the figures for prosecutions are conspicuously high in both Middlesex and Kent).

The basic situation was that cars, often registered in urban districts, passed through rural areas on roads to whose upkeep their owners made no contribution, pounding them to pieces and spreading dust over crops, houses and passers-by. The regulations made under the 1896 Act required drivers to stop when requested by the police or by persons in charge of restive horses (and, of course, not to exceed 12 mph). These requirements were often

ignored. As cars carried no distinctive registration numbers, it was extremely hard for the rural constable to recognise them, still less their drivers whose typical gear was cap and goggles. The rural case against cars was concisely put by the deputy chairman of the Bucks. County Council, who wrote to the secretary of the Automobile Club in December 1900, in words that would have been true throughout the fifteen years after the 1896 Act:

When you call to mind that the sufferers are generally local rate-payers, who have been draining their own pockets to improve the highways, and that the muffled up automobilists are strangers, who in many cases contribute nothing to the maintenance and repair of these roads, you can understand how the feeling of hostility grows and sweeps all automobilists into the same net of unpopularity.

He went on to advise motorists to be content with moderate speeds – at least until horses and the public were more used to cars – and to advocate the nationalisation of public highways to make their repair a charge on the Exchequer. “In this way you will conciliate the ratepayers.”³⁰

By the early 1900s two groups of opinion were agreed on the need for a change in the law. The changes which they proposed were very different. Their positions were concisely summed up in the words of a later report:

The general users of the highway complained of the frequency of offences against the provisions as to the maximum speed limit, and of the difficulty of bringing offenders to justice in consequence of the absence of any provision for securing the identification of a car.

The users of motor cars ascribed the disregard of the speed limit provisions to the general feeling that the particular provisions were, in practice, oppressive. They claimed that motor cars should be allowed to go at a much faster pace than twelve miles an hour in cases where no danger to others would ensue from a higher speed.³¹

The basic dispute here was one which has continued ever since in arguments about the regulation of motor cars. “General users” claimed in 1900, as they still do, that common sense could identify a speed above which it would clearly be dangerous to drive, and that the simplest way of limiting the dangers caused by cars was to forbid them to exceed this speed. The counter-claim of “the users

of motor cars" fell into two parts. In the first place, they argued there was no single 'dangerous' speed; it could be entirely safe to drive across Salisbury Plain at 50 mph, dangerous in the extreme to do more than 5 mph down Piccadilly. No general speed limit could cover all cases. Secondly, to insist on a general limit which was patently absurd in some cases could only increase danger. It would be disregarded, perhaps even where it made sense, and this would help to discredit the law as a whole. Laws must be closely related to opinion: if they were not, they were bad laws.

The 1896 Act had laid down a speed limit. But there were still in force the provisions of the Highways Act, 1835, which made it an offence to drive (a horse, naturally) "recklessly, negligently or furiously". Motorists claimed that if some similar provision were to be the basic restriction on cars, without any fixed limit, the law would be more flexible and thus – because it would allow speeding on empty roads – more popular and more effective. The problem was to identify the 'furiously' driven car. After many thousands of years of the horse, anyone could recognise when a horse was travelling at a normal pace and when it was going too fast. The signs of 'fury' were equally clear: the foam and sweat of the horse, the shouts and gestures of its driver. It was not the same with the car. An expensive car running on good roads could travel smoothly and with relatively little noise at high speeds, and the subjective content of charge of 'furious' driving became extremely apparent. In furious driving cases, inarticulate police witnesses needed corroboration from bystanders or victims, and often found it hard to secure convictions even so. The fixed speed limit furnished an objective standard, provided only that there was some way of showing that the car had exceeded it. Police experience, and their views on the two approaches, tended to vary with the prejudices of their local Bench, but in general at this stage they preferred to rely on the limit. Motorists were, as they have remained, overwhelmingly, against limits.

Rural opinion reinforced the views of the police. The hostility to cars in the country districts led to a concerted demand for lower speed limits (usually 10 mph) and for compulsory numbering. Many county councils had passed resolutions demanding both these steps. Increasingly vigorous attempts were made to enforce the existing law. In September 1899, a new Chief Constable, Captain Sant, took up office in what was to become one of the most celebrated

anti-motoring forces, Surrey. The following June he issued a general order to his force which read, in part:

Having given cyclists and motorists due notice, I am now anxious to take such steps as may be practicable to put an end to the nuisance and danger caused by reckless riders and drivers and show them that the warnings were not idle ones.³²

The same general order suggested the soon familiar device of stationing policemen in pairs, to 'trap' speeding motorists.

Motorists – which meant in practice the Automobile Club – were concerned at all these developments. As early as June 1900, Alfred Harmsworth* suggested that the Club should take action to ward off the threat of more restrictive legislation. Owners seem in general to have been less concerned about the possibility of lower speed limits than about the proposal for compulsory numbering. To this they objected strongly; in the words of the Automobile Club, they felt that "numbers are associated in the minds of the public with hackney coaches, etc.". Many owners announced that they would give up their cars if compulsory numbering came in.³³

The Automobile Club sent circulars to all 750 members, warning them that the demand for compulsory numbering and lower speed limits had been brought about by the reckless driving, and refusal to stop when asked, of a minority of drivers. Membership of the Club was considered the best guarantee of good behaviour, both because of the Club's sobering influence and because of its policy of discouraging members appearing in court from pessimistically entering damaging pleas of 'guilty' rather than fighting the case all the way. But Club membership was expensive. In an attempt to get round this, the Club set up the Motor Vehicle Users' Defence Association, with a subscription of only one pound. In 1901 it set up the more successful Motor Union, with a subscription of only a guinea. Efficiently organised by W. Rees Jeffreys,† the secretary of the RIA, the MU had 5,000 members within four years, and by March 1906 over 11,000. Writing in 1906, Jeffreys described the MU's aims as:

- (1) to oppose any legislation restrictive to automobilism;
- (2) to negotiate with local authorities for road improvement;

* The future Lord Northcliffe, an enthusiastic motorist.

† W. Rees Jeffreys (1871–1954). A life-long and fanatical roads lobbyist, whose single-minded devotion to this cause brought him into frequent collision with the authorities. Organised Motor Union 1903–10. Secretary, Road Board, 1910–18. Secretary, later Chairman, of RIA from 1901.

- (3) to protect members against illegal bridge tolls and excessive rail charges;
- (4) to improve hotel accommodation;
- (5) to do such work for automobilism as can be done only by a strong and united body, representative of all automobilists within the UK.³⁴

At the same time, the Club mounted an elaborate propaganda programme directed at the county councils and the police. All chief constables were sent a copy of a pamphlet, consisting of a covering letter explaining that lower speed limits and compulsory numbering would damage the motor industry, and ten separate appendices dealing with such subjects as the relative stopping-power of the motor car and the horse; the history of the horse's gradual acceptance of the bicycle; various recent public speeches in support of the motoring movement; a proposed series of demonstrations for councillors; and so on.³⁵ The Club also wrote to the Local Government Board, asking that no action be taken on the county councils' demands for restrictions on cars at least until the councillors knew more about cars (as they would do after the demonstration).

With this campaign under way, the Club did its best to drum up support for it from other interests. The two cycling clubs were asked to lobby the LGB against the numbering of cars, on the grounds that if numbering became compulsory "it will constitute so serious a departure from the customs of this country in respect of the privacy of private vehicles that the numbering of bicycles will probably follow".³⁶ Hotel-keepers were also asked to join in; restrictions on motoring would affect a movement "which should be of the greatest value to all hotel-keepers".

These activities reached a climax in the middle of 1901. The Automobile Club distributed a 'Draft Memorial' for signature by all manufacturers and distributors of motor cars, protesting against speed limit and numbering proposals as likely irretrievably to damage the British motor industry:

Although such a restriction might be possible on the Continent, where there is not the strong feeling against public identification or the attraction of public attention which is the characteristic of the English gentleman, the stigma implied by the numbering of a motor carriage would not be tolerated in this country.

Copies of this memorial, signed by representatives of about 150

firms, were sent to the editors of all the principal papers in England and Wales in early April, as well as to the President of the LGB and clerks to all the county councils. Some small-scale demonstrations for the police and councillors had already taken place; in June a mass demonstration took place, on three successive days, in London. In August the Club appointed a Special Legislation Committee to consider the terms of new motor legislation. In the autumn, the Club told the County Councils Association that they intended to introduce a Bill to amend the 1896 Act: the 14 mph speed limit should be kept, but the President of the LGB should be able to make regulations prescribing higher speeds; cars should be identifiable, not by numbers – which were associated with public transport – but by names (“in common use for the identification of houses, ships, . . . , etc.”) to be chosen by the car-owner and painted in letters three inches high. Provision would be made for appeals against magistrates’ decisions. Prosecutions for dangerous or furious driving would have to show that danger had been caused to people actually on the road at the time; in other words, speed in itself, on an empty road, should not be considered dangerous.

The government meanwhile gave nothing away. Although Lord Onslow, the Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, consented to attend the Automobile Club’s annual dinner in November, he there made it plain that no early action should be expected; more information was needed. There would have to be full discussion of the subject in Parliament, and perhaps a Select Committee should be set up. Henry Chaplin said that technical developments had been so rapid that his Act was already out of date.

Although county council opinion about the speed limit continued to be very divided, the Club’s campaign was in general a marked success. In November 1901 the County Councils Association’s executive council resolved that no further restrictions on motor cars were necessary; the general law of the land, plus the requirement that drivers should stop when asked, was sufficient to secure the public safety – provided that all cars were numbered. The speed limit should be abolished. But the penalty clauses in the Acts should be stiffened to deal with cars.

This was quite an advance on the county councils’ earlier position. In January 1902 a deputation from the CCA, accompanied by the secretary of the Automobile Club, put the same points to Walter

Long,* the President of the LGB. Long expressed general agreement with all of them, and thanked the Club for their "very valuable assistance".

But the CCA could not speak for every councillor, still less for every MP for a rural division. Describing the provisions of the Club's Bill to a meeting in January 1902, the chairman of the Automobile Club warned that "it is known that on the introduction of any Bill on this subject into Parliament there will be very considerable opposition". The Automobile Club continued to work to disarm this. The speeches made by Onslow and Chaplin at the Club's dinner were copied and sent to every county councillor, every MP and every peer. A little later the Club urged its members to press MPs of their acquaintance to join "the automobile party, consisting of MPs who are willing to take an active part in bringing about reasonable motor legislation". In March a letter from the Club's General Council, urging a change in the law, was sent to over two thousand national and local newspapers. It urged that the 12-mph limit and systematic prosecution (leading to heavy fines for technical offences)

cannot but fail to damage in this country an industry which is encouraged on the continent and in the USA by the chiefs of states, by the government, by the press and by the people, which is providing abroad, and, if unencumbered by unnecessary legislation, should provide in this Kingdom work at good wages for many thousands of men.

The Times' leader-writer agreed: "No longer a toy, an article of luxury or the amusement of a small minority, the light locomotive should be allowed to serve the public to the full extent of its capacity."³⁷ In May 1902 Walter Long could confidently congratulate the House of Commons on its apparently unanimous support for a change in the law "which would compel motor cars to carry some means of identification and to enable them to go at any pace they like without danger to the public".³⁸ It looked as though the motorists were about to get what they had been asking for.

In declaring that the motor car was no longer a luxury or the

* Walter Long (1854-1924): Conservative MP, 1880-1921. Parliamentary Secretary, LGB, 1886-92; President, Board of Agriculture, 1895-1900; President, LGB, 1900-5. Later Colonial Secretary and First Lord of the Admiralty. Unsuccessful contender for leadership of Conservative party, 1911. Viscount, 1921.

perquisite of a minority, the leader-writer of *The Times* was expressing, for perhaps the first time, a theme which was still being repeated in pained tones by spokesmen for the private motorist sixty years later. The problem is one more of semantics than of objective fact. But even if it is true of Britain today, it was certainly far from true in the early 1900s. The peculiar position of motorists as a very small minority group, distinguished by their ownership of an expensive technical novelty, was important in defining their role as a political force. Cars were expensive. It was possible to buy a car for £200 – approximately £1,200 at 1960s prices – or even less; the 5-hp Vauxhall, which first came out in 1903, cost £150, and the Automobile Club thought it worth organising a Small Car Trial for cars costing under £200 as early as 1904.

However, in the view of a motoring writer in 1904, £200 was the lowest realistic price for a touring car; although there might be a great future for cars under this price, they could not yet stand up to 'severe and regular use'.³⁹ The car owned by the average member of the Automobile Club was more likely to cost upwards of £300. Running costs were, relative to today, even higher. Claude Johnson,* the secretary of the Club, estimated that 10,000 miles in the lightest possible 5-horsepower 'voiturette' cost £67, *excluding* servicing; in a 10-hp, 2-cylinder car, £163.⁴⁰ In a talk given to the Automobile Club at the end of 1902, one of a series pleasantly called "Motors for Men of Moderate Means", the speaker estimated his annual expenditure on a good car, costing £525, at about £335; and this excluded depreciation.⁴¹

All this must be seen against the background of a society in which the average weekly wage of an adult man was less than 30 shillings, and in which only 4 per cent of the population left property worth more than £300. In 1907 the *Economist* commented that the car was a substitute for the carriage and pair; until it could compete with the horse and trap, it would not come into general use.⁴² This was true at least up until the war.

Ownership of a motor car thus implied a recognisable social and economic status. From this various things followed. Motorists tended to be regarded as a homogeneous class, both by their critics

* Claude Johnson: Principal Clerk, Imperial Institute, 1888–98; Secretary, Automobile Club, 1898–1903. Subsequently Joint Manager, C. S. Rolls & Co., and Managing Director, Rolls-Royce Ltd.

and by themselves. The conflict between motorists and others was partly an urban/rural one; it was partly seen as a class conflict. Motorists were criticised for endangering relationships between the gentry and the peasantry. They themselves were critical of 'anti-motorist' legislation as pandering to class prejudice and thus likely to inflame it. This notion of community also underlay the style and to some extent the status of the Automobile Club. Long after it had ceased to be appropriate, the Automobile Club's attempts to restrain 'road-hogs' were based on appeals to members' sense of community, and the final sanction for lawbreakers was expulsion from the Club. The Club, as the leading organisation representing motorists as a class, was treated from the beginning with a respect which seems never to have been accorded to the cyclists. But this respect rested on more than mere social class. To understand it, it is essential to forget the modern connotations of 'motorist'. Today the motor car is designed by one group of specialists, produced under the supervision of another, sold by another, repaired and serviced by another, occasionally raced and competed in by another, but in general used by a vast non-specialist class with no more interest in or understanding of the technical side of their car than of their television set. In the early 1900s all these groups overlapped. The gentleman-amateurs of the period were often as interested in the technical and commercial aspects of the motor car as they were in it as a hobby. This was indeed the rationale of the Automobile Club; and against the background of an industry which had grown up haphazardly from backyard workshops and bicycle repair firms, the Club long remained by far the most important force for defining and imposing standards.

The Club regularly tested (and often exploded) the claims made by manufacturers to have invented dustless cars, or non-skid tyres, or fuel-saving carburettors. The pages of its *Journal* carry, side by side with notes on social events, technical papers on the design of headlights or the merits of chain drives. It was the Club which, for the guidance of private buyers, originally laid down the definition of a unit of 'horsepower' which underlay the taxation and the design of British cars from 1909 until after 1945. It was this virtual monopoly of technical expertise, as much as the social status of motorists, which very soon drew the government into an inter-dependent relationship with the Club. Walter Long told the county councils deputation in 1902 that

a great deal can be done through the motor car clubs in the country; and I desire myself to express my gratitude to the Automobile Club . . . for the very valuable assistance they have been good enough to give me. They were good enough to meet me early last autumn . . . they have taken immense trouble in sending through the country circulars, in order to obtain information for me.⁴³

For the first five years of the Club's life it was the government's only central point of contact with the motor-car movement, and despite its theoretically amateur status it was treated as speaking not only for motorists but for manufacturers as well. Having organised in 1899 a successful but unprofitable public exhibition, the Club made an arrangement ceding the rights to organise shows to a private concessionaire. In 1902 the Club's founder, F. R. Simms, set up a new trade association to take over motor shows, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT). Simms was the SMMT's first president, and its links with the Club remained close. But for many years the Club was regarded as not merely the senior but the more representative and responsible body. When in 1908/9 the government wanted to introduce a new system of motor taxation, they consulted only the Club; and as late as 1924, when the Ministry of Transport were considering a further change in the system, they again turned to the Club.

But it was social factors which made the motorists, in another context, such an embarrassment in Edwardian England. As is already clear, one powerful reason why the ladies and gentlemen driving cars were reluctant to carry distinguishing numbers was that this would make it easier to identify those who broke the law. Rural campaigns against the motor menace had as their direct and intended effect the appearance in the dock of large numbers of the ruling class. To this the motorists' reaction was to try to persuade the authorities that breaking the speed limit or frightening horses were not offences in the accepted sense at all. The secretary of the Automobile Club, Claude Johnson, wrote to the Home Office in February 1902, pointing out that "a number of public men of standing, including the past and present Presidents of the LGB, have admitted that the present legal limit of speed should be done away with", and asking to be allowed to present evidence of excessive penalties imposed on motorists; if the Home Secretary were satisfied that the motorists had a case, would he direct the justices in such a way as to "secure for the automobilist an equal measure

of justice with other users of highways"? (Home Office officials commented: "A reasonable letter." But, as they told Johnson, they did not think that the prerogative of mercy could properly be used to deprive the courts of summary jurisdiction of the discretion vested in them.)⁴⁴

As long as motoring offences continued to be treated as such, the well-connected defendants continued to appear before the courts and to fall foul of the police.* The Chief Constable of Huntingdonshire wrote to the Home Office in some embarrassment in September 1902. His main difficulties with motorists were that they refused to stop when signalled by the police; that they gave false addresses; that their cars were now more powerful and faster; and that they tried to bribe the police. His letter went on in a tone that suggested that he did not entirely believe in the situation he had described:

It is a significant fact, that two gentlemen of education and position, who have during the past quarter been proceeded against, when exceeding 20 mph passed horses and carts (near where the police stopped them), which they subsequently declared they never saw. It being impossible to doubt their word, the question arises as to whether great mischief may not be done, by want of attention on the part of drivers, or their inability to see what is on the road.

With mild scepticism, the Home Office minuted on the file: "An interesting and temperate report. The startling evidence occasionally given by 'gentlemen of education and position' when charged with furious driving is attributed by this courteous Chief Constable to want of attention and inability to see."⁴⁶

Practical administrators might adopt this coolly realistic tone, but for those more disposed to general reflections on society, the notion that gentlemen might deliberately break the law and then lie to escape the consequences of their act was profoundly shocking. Similarly, motorists found it shocking that they were assumed to be lying when they were not. Henry Norman, MP, writing a little later, recalled appearing as a witness in a motoring case where, having heard a police constable's evidence, he himself charged the constable with deliberate perjury:

The magistrate, having heard my evidence and accusation, merely

* In numerical terms, the problem was still relatively small. The annual average of all offenders under the Highway Acts between 1898 and 1902 was only 965. In the following five-year period, offences increased more than sixfold.⁴⁵

remarked that motorists must learn to obey the law – ‘forty shillings and costs’. The court contained a number of young constables learning their duties, and it appeared to me a disastrous training for them that a magistrate, hearing a Member of Parliament on oath charge one of their number with perjury, should utterly ignore the charge, not even recalling the constable or making the slightest effort to test the accusation made against him.⁴⁷

The easiest way for the neutral observer of the whole scene to avoid being embarrassed by it was to assume that the lawbreakers and liars were mainly not gentlemen.

Conspicuous in the comments of this time is the theme that dangerous driving was the fault of a few, socially atypical motorists. In September 1901, *The Times*, reflecting that the motor car had come to stay, but that the interests of other road-users must be preserved, concluded: “The number of owners and drivers of motor cars who are not gentlemen, would seem to be unduly large. There is no turning a cad into a gentleman, but there is such a thing as making even cads fear the law.”⁴⁸

Two years later *The Times* was suggesting that the ‘road-hog’ was probably a transient phenomenon, drawn mainly

from a class which possesses money in excess of brains or culture, and which has not had an opportunity of learning insensibly, in the course of generations, the consideration for the rights of others which is part of the natural heritage of gentlefolk. For people of his order the law is an educational influence of the highest value; and when he has once received the ineffaceable stamp of the gaolbird society may be expected, before long, to range itself on the side of the law, and to complete the reformation which it will be the work of the magistracy to begin.⁴⁹

Walter Long, introducing his Motor Car Bill in 1903, and facing the charge that this was a class problem in which the interests of the rich motorist were set against those of the poor who suffered from them, insisted that many cars were owned by professional men and that – according to the magistrates – the law was by no means broken only by the gentry, but often by people merely hiring cars for the day.⁵⁰ Similarly the *Automobile Club Journal* expressed concern at the damage done to the reputation of the motoring movement by the “cheap scorcher” into whose hands the cheaper second-hand car could now too easily fall.⁵¹

Other explanations were offered. The weekly *Justice of the Peace*,

commenting on the provisions of the Motor Car Act in January 1904, thought they should "deter the most daring of *chauffeurs*. The foreign origin, by the way, of many of these gentry is to a certain extent responsible for the trouble they have caused in the past."⁵²

It was undeniable that motorists, however defined, were a minority and a rich minority at that. It is arguable that attempts to show that lawbreaking motorists were not members of the gentry, or not English, or at least not even the owners of the cars they drove, merely exacerbated their minority status.* This social background is crucial to understanding the unpopularity of motorists, and more particularly the significance of this for a government faced with the need to legislate for them. It was not twenty years since the agricultural labourers had first got the vote; the threat, or the imagined threat, of socialism was already driving radical leaders of both parties into attempts to win the working class away from the left, and to smother with welfare legislation the class conflict which seemed all too likely. As more and more cars drove further and faster down the dusty roads so inadequately maintained at the expense of rural rate-payers, the goodwill expressed by politicians in 1901 and 1902 rapidly evaporated. The motorists' hope of a total escape from restrictions proved unrealisable; the legislation which was to be passed in 1903, in an attempt to give something to the motorists while silencing the clamour of their opponents, was to fail to do either. The consequences of this unhappy compromise were to endure another thirty years.

However, in the spring of 1902 motorists were confident that things were going their way. The Home Office had refused to treat offences under the existing law as merely technical, and in May in the House of Commons the Home Secretary declared that he had given strict instructions to the police to prosecute wherever the law was broken. But, he added, it was of course extremely difficult to estimate accurately, or even approximately, the speed of a moving car.⁵³ This seemed to foreshadow an end to speed limits. More concrete, and still more encouraging, was the progress being made in discussions between the Automobile Club and the Local Government Board about the Motor Vehicles Registration Bill being

* It was also plainly at odds with the facts. Among the prominent and habitual breakers of the limit was the Prime Minister, A. J. Balfour. When the Motor Car Act of 1903 kept (although raising) the speed limit, one MP proposed "that nothing in this Act shall apply to the present Prime Minister".

prepared by the Club's Special Legislation Committee. In May Walter Long, asked by Chaplin now to remove the existing restrictions, said that he was prepared to make new regulations. He hoped soon to put forward proposals satisfactory to the Automobile Club and adequate to secure the public safety.⁵⁴

The main responsibility for discussions on the Bill and for its introduction had fallen to John Scott-Montagu.* A member of Parliament as well as of the Club, he was already and for the next twenty years was to remain one of the most active and prominent spokesmen for the 'roads movement'. In his own journal, *The Car (Illustrated)*, he described Long as well known to be "very friendly to the automobile movement". Montagu thought the LGB less positively enthusiastic; their attitude seemed to him to be that they declined to alter the law on their own initiative, but would help when the Club's Bill was brought in.⁵⁵

As introduced at the end of June 1902, the Bill had three main objects: to repeal the speed limit and enforce adequate means of identification; to provide for an appeal from magistrates' courts to Quarter Sessions; and to raise the speed limit for heavy commercial vehicles. Montagu reported in *The Car* that the principles of the Bill were approved by the LGB; but it was not yet in final form, and, as a Private Member's Bill on a contentious topic, was unlikely to pass in the current session.⁵⁶

Montagu was right on all points. When the Bill was introduced, Balfour said plainly that, despite its interest, there would be no time for it during that session.⁵⁷ Over a fortnight later – an interesting comment on the leisurely pace of official business – Long circulated his views on the Bill to the Cabinet. There was, he said, room for amending the law in all the directions suggested by the Bill. In particular, since the present speed limit was constantly exceeded, it might be reasonable to repeal it and to rely on the law against furious driving. The Bill still needed tidying up in detail; but unless his colleagues objected, he proposed, without committing himself to details, to assent to its main principles: "There would be some convenience in letting the subject be ventilated."⁵⁸

Ventilation was all that was possible. When Parliament

* John Scott-Montagu (1866–1929). Conservative MP 1892–1905, when succeeded father as Lord Montagu of Beaulieu. Interested in transport of every kind. Member, Road Board, 1910–19. Adviser on transport matters to government of India, 1915–19.

reassembled in the autumn, Montagu reintroduced the Bill. It was, he said, "a reasonable and definite effort of the Automobile Club to meet public demand by sensible legislation". The government could, if they wished, help it on its way, or adopt it, or amend it as they thought fit.⁵⁹ But a week later, Long said flatly that there was still no possibility of legislation on the subject.⁶⁰

As time passed, two developments occurred. Members of the Automobile Club had never collectively felt bound by their Legislation Committee's approval for Montagu's Bill. Many complained that the Committee had gone far beyond the terms of any mandate that the Club could have given it. The Club continued to discuss, and to criticise, the provisions of the Bill throughout the winter of 1902-3. The proposal for compulsory identification was still far from acceptable, even when packaged, as in the Bill, with the abolition of the speed limit.

This continuing resistance by Club members worried the realists like Montagu, very conscious of the second main development – the growing public demand for action against the motor car. The Club continued its lobbying efforts, circulating in January 1903 what it called 'Blue Book No. 2' to every member of the Houses of Commons and Lords, and every county councillor. The 'Blue Book', subtitled *The law as to Motor Vehicles. What it is and what it should be*, was a miscellaneous collection of speeches, petitions, correspondence and newspaper articles. Some of the optimism of Club members about the likely impact of this propaganda must have derived from the success of the simultaneous campaign, which reached its climax in March, to have the international 'Gordon Bennett' race held on the roads of Ireland. The Club had written to the Irish local authorities, hotel proprietors, railway and shipping companies, to magistrates, county lieutenants, chairmen of quarter sessions, Benchers of King's Inn, Fellows of the Irish Royal College of Surgeons, to the Bishop of Kildare and the thirteen parish priests on the proposed course, asking them to support the proposal. The result was a total success. The Light Locomotives (Ireland) Bill passed through all its stages, without opposition and almost without amendment, in less than a week.⁶¹ The Club might reasonably have felt satisfied.

They might have felt less satisfied, and more inclined to share the views of Montagu, had they known of the activities of their new patron, the King. Despite his enthusiasm for motoring, he was in

contact with at least three of his Ministers in an attempt to have the race stopped. His private secretary, Lord Knollys, wrote to Akers-Douglas, the Home Secretary, in February that the King hoped that no racing in motors would be allowed on British roads: "He thinks it would be very dangerous for the occupants of the motors, and still more so for the Public, and he is strongly opposed to any such proposals, which might be made, being favourably entertained."⁶² Knollys wrote again, later the same month, to say that the King withdrew his opposition, since the arrangements had gone so far; but his opinion remained the same, and he hoped the race would not be repeated – certainly not in England.⁶³ This was not the end of the King's concern. When in May a series of fatal accidents caused the Paris to Madrid road race to be abandoned, Knollys wrote to Balfour's secretary, hoping on the King's behalf that the Prime Minister had seen the press accounts of the French disasters, and adding:

His Majesty is full of apprehension that severe accidents, and probable loss of life, will be the result of the Motor Race in Ireland, and he wishes to place it on record [as] his strong opinion that it should not have been allowed.

I may add that he spoke in this sense on the subject two or three months ago both to Mr Balfour and Lord Dudley.⁶⁴

The Irish race was an entire success (although one of Montagu's correspondents later suggested that it was precisely this success and "the speeds indulged in then and . . . so graphically described in the newspapers" which helped to turn public opinion against abolishing the speed limit).⁶⁵ But the King's opposition was significant, and representative of opinions widely held. The county councils in particular were now insisting on compulsory marking. A writer in *The Nineteenth Century* suggested that "An Act which should confer *carte blanche* upon Motorists would damage the Ministry far more at the rural polls of the next election than even a five shilling duty on flour".⁶⁶

The Harmsworth press, reflecting what it sensed to be public opinion, took a consistently hostile line towards motors, despite Harmsworth's own fondness for them. The *Daily Telegraph* started an anti-motor campaign under the general heading of *The Social Juggernaut*. So much did Harmsworth allow motoring to be attacked in the columns of the *Daily Mail* that C. S. Rolls asked Claude

Johnson to intervene with Harmsworth and get him to lay off. The summary of Rolls's arguments which Johnson sent to Harmsworth is an admirable expression of the viewpoint of the intelligent motorist of the day:

- (1) Cars have come to stay;
- (2) They will very shortly, to a very large extent, replace the horse;
- (3) Road travel must be considerably accelerated and can be accelerated without danger;
- (4) Our hereditary instincts are shocked at seeing anything on the road faster than the horse, but as our senses become educated we shall recognise the fact that speed of itself is not dangerous but the inability to stop is dangerous;
- (5) It is therefore no good for people to get hysterical because motor cars are driven fast, as it is certain they will be driven fast;
- (6) We want to encourage the legitimate use of automobiles and to discourage (and, if practicable, render impossible) the illegitimate use of automobiles;
- (7) Cars must be numbered.⁶⁷

But many people were 'getting hysterical' about the speeds at which cars were driven. Automobile Club members were still discussing alternative proposals for speed limits and compulsory numbering, but Montagu, as usual, recognised the true situation. There was no promise of motor-car legislation in the King's Speech in February 1903; Long wrote to Montagu: "I am afraid that the most useful suggestion I can make is that you should have a Bill ready yourself."⁶⁸ Montagu, anxious to act on this, tried to persuade the Club that the time for discussion was over; at any moment the LGB might yield to public pressure and introduce a Bill of its own. The House of Commons was unlikely to grant any increase in the speed limit unless numbering were enforced. Motorists therefore now had the choice between continuing with the *status quo* and agreeing to be numbered in return for the abolition of the limit. But the Club as a whole refused to accept this advice. In April 1903, Lord Russell* solemnly proposed to introduce, as a compromise, a Bill providing for very heavy penalties (£50 or three months' hard labour) for various offences such as refusing to stop for a police

* Earl Russell (1865-1931). Elder brother of Bertrand; electrical engineer, barrister, company promoter, Progressive member of LCC and pioneer motorist. Involved in some sensational matrimonial litigation culminating in his own trial and conviction, by his peers, for bigamy, 1901. Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Transport, 1929; Under-Secretary, India Office, 1929-31.

GENTLEMEN OF EDUCATION AND POSITION

constable, coupled with a requirement for number plates of *maximum* dimensions of 7 by 3 inches. Montagu was disgusted: "No legislature would ever pass such a useless provision as inconspicuous marking."⁶⁹ Meanwhile the Automobile Club Committee, in an attempt to show that it was not simply truckling to the government and ignoring the opinions of its own members, busied itself with a referendum among its members; they were asked:

- (1) If the speed limit were abolished, the law relating to furious driving amended, and the tare limit raised,* would you support identification either by numbers or by names?
- (2) Do you consider the Club should do nothing more to promote legislation?
- (3) Do you support Lord Russell's proposals?

It was growing rather late for referenda. Long was by now persuaded of the need for action, and at the beginning of May he promised to introduce a Bill soon. A little later, he told a rural audience in Wiltshire that he hoped the agricultural community would realise "that the present state of the law was unfortunate". The anti-motorists in Parliament were preparing for battle; all MPs were circularised in an attempt to secure their support for restrictive legislation. In a debate on the LGB estimates, some strongly anti-motorist views were expressed, and the LGB was criticised for failure to act.⁷⁰ Motorists and their supporters professed to be encouraged by this debate. Montagu described the House as a whole as showing a "laughing and jeering attitude" to the absurd utterances of the anti-motorists, and *The Times* concluded that the sense of the discussion was that "the speed limit . . . will manifestly have to be abolished in any permanent legislation".⁷¹

Opinion had now crystallised round several distinct groups. The extreme anti-motorists, in so far as they had practicable proposals at all, were insisting that there should be both a speed limit and compulsory numbering. The extreme motorists were determined to abolish the limit and to resist numbering. The more moderate motorists, typified by Montagu, were anxious to persuade the others to accept some restrictions – notably numbering – in the hope of buying off demands for more repressive measures. Rural opinion as

* The provisions of the 1896 Act applied only to 'light locomotives' of not more than three tons weight unladen. The motor manufacturers complained that this limit was hindering the development of commercial motor vehicles.

a whole seems to have been confused, but still in general hostile to motorists; the County Councils Association was probably untypical in sharing the opinions of the moderate motorists. In the middle was the government, embarrassed by the whole dispute, uncertain about the best course to take and anxious not to legislate without some clear guide to action.

Long's decision to introduce a Bill must have been strengthened by the result of the Automobile Club's referendum, which in a postal vote showed a comfortable two-thirds majority supporting the moderates' line. On June 18, he put his proposals to his colleagues.⁷² The tone of the memorandum introducing his draft Bill was one of detached exasperation. At no point did it suggest that the government might have an interest in the question beyond the basic political need to silence an embarrassing clamour. He began:

Considerable pressure has been put upon me to bring in a Bill on the subject of motor cars during the present Session. The pressure has not come so much from the general public as from persons using motor cars, who are apprehensive that, unless something is done, the feeling against these vehicles will become so strong as practically to prevent their use altogether.

He went on to say that he had consulted a large number of people; last week's debate had been 'instructive'; and he had concluded that a Bill would be 'generally acceptable'.

The Bill provided for the registration and numbering of cars. It made it an offence to drive recklessly, or negligently, or at a speed or in a manner dangerous to the public "having regard to all the circumstances of the case". It did not, however, abolish the existing speed limit, but raised it to 25 mph. Long's explanation of this was somewhat tortuous. He did not propose to say that speed should be limited to 25 mph; using an argument which has been repeated in discussions of speed limits ever since, he suggested that this formula would lead to 25 mph being regarded "not as a maximum, but as always permissible". It should instead be an offence to drive any vehicle recklessly or faster than was reasonable or proper – and 25 mph, whatever the circumstances, should be deemed faster than reasonable or proper. Local authorities could apply to the LGB for local limits in specific places. The Bill was to expire in three years unless renewed.

Although Long did not mention the pressure from the opponents

of cars, it was clearly in his mind. In the June debate, he had recalled almost incredulously the unanimous support shown by the House the year before for abolishing the speed limit, and commented: "How completely has feeling changed since that time."⁷³ In July he was to write in a letter that there was "an embittered feeling in the general public against all persons who use motors, which as a dangerous class feeling is perhaps without parallel in modern times".⁷⁴ When he came to introduce the Bill in the Commons he found it necessary to deny the suggestion not only that the motor car problem was a class question, but also that the purpose of his Bill was to help the users of cars.

Long's colleagues seem to have been even less concerned about the views of the anti-motorists than he was himself. When the Bill was published a week after it was first circulated to the Cabinet, it contained no reference to 25 mph or to any other limit; road-hogs were to be restrained by the provisions against reckless, negligent or dangerous driving. In this form it at last gave the motorists what they wanted. In general, they applauded; the *Automobile Club Journal*, though uneasy about some of the provisions, was delighted at the abolition of the limit. Montagu agreed, and set out to round up a 'motorists' party in the Commons; 57 of them attended the group's first meeting the following month.⁷⁵

The Bill started in the Lords on July 7.⁷⁶ The tone of the opening debates was moderate and constructive enough; the government spokesman, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, explained that many complaints had been made to government departments about the defects of the existing law, and that all who had studied the subject were agreed that "the existing position of matters is unsatisfactory in the extreme". He explained the objections to a fixed speed limit – that it took no account of varying circumstances, and encouraged a scattering of the police force in places where there was no danger; to the present penalties – that they were quite inadequate to deter wealthy offenders; to proposals for driving tests – that they would not reduce accidents, since the most skilful driver, who would easily pass such tests, was often the worst offender. Lord Rosebery commented that the motor industry was only yet in its infancy; in five years it would be ten times its present size; the whole subject was urgent, and one of the gravest questions with which the government had to deal.

For the rest of the Bill's progress through the Lords, the

government position was made clear, and prevailed. There were a few speakers like Lord Wemyss, who described motorists as going about "in goggles and a ghastly sort of headgear too horrible to behold. It was clear that when they put on that dress they meant to break the law." But such remarks were outweighed by respectful comments on the future of the motor industry, and the importance of freeing it from its present restrictions. These were taken up by Lord Balfour to reinforce his unequivocal declaration that the abolition of the speed limit was integral to the Bill. He warned the proposer of a 20-mph limit that he risked losing the Bill and thus damaging the motor industry. The proposal was easily defeated.

The Bill emerged from the Lords almost intact, but in an atmosphere of controversy and uncertainty. The Automobile Club Committee had generally approved of the proceedings in the Lords. But they felt that the Bill gave too much discretion to the LGB to make detailed traffic regulations, and to the courts to decide sentences; uneasy about possible developments, they tried, without success, to insist that Montagu's group should refer any new policy decisions back to the Club. The County Councils Association, at their annual meeting, approved the Bill. The SMMT - who, as Montagu had complained, had until now been conspicuously silent - wrote to the Prime Minister, Long and Lord Balfour, protesting against the powers given to the police to arrest motoring offenders without a warrant, and once again making out the case against a general speed limit. It was not unduly pessimistic to do so; at the annual meeting of the Highland and Agricultural Society, addressed by the President of the Board of Agriculture, it was overwhelmingly resolved that the dangerous driving provisions would be unworkable without a fixed limit, the abolition of which "our country is not prepared to accept". On the same day, a special meeting of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture resolved, with several MPs present, that a maximum speed limit should be defined.⁷⁷

The government found the situation hard to assess. Despite the Bill's smooth passage through the Lords, the prospect of opposition in the Commons was real enough to lead the Prime Minister to declare that it might be impossible to get the Bill through, "unless those deeply interested in the subject will consent to restrain the perfectly legitimate exercise of their debating powers in defence of their own particular views".⁷⁸ Long told the Central Chamber of

Agriculture, in a letter from his private secretary, that he hoped that

a strong effort will be made by the commonsense party on each side to carry into law a Bill which has been devised after the most patient and careful consideration to reconcile as far as possible the important and conflicting interests involved.⁷⁹

The LGB released to the press the full text of another letter from Long's private secretary, to a correspondent who had written to express the "strong indignation" of "quiet, reasonable middle-class people" against the Bill. Long explained that the main object of the Bill was

to pile up safeguard upon safeguard into a formidable barrier of defence to the general public against the dangerous practices of motorists, which have unhappily become prevalent under the existing law.

He went on to elaborate Balfour's rather defeatist threats; he hoped that failure to understand the purport of the Bill would not result in opposition in the Commons which might make it impossible to put the Bill into law in that session. *The Times* declared itself shocked at this attitude; it would be "a serious dereliction of public duty" if the government really meant to drop the Bill if it became the subject of debate.⁸⁰ The *Westminster Gazette* felt that it would be "a considerable disaster if the present condition of anarchy is prolonged for another year".⁸¹

But Long's evident anxiety was fully justified, as the opening debate in the Commons showed.⁸² His own introduction of the Bill was notably defensive, with its attempts to demonstrate that the Bill was neither a sectional nor a class measure, but concerned with the common good. The argument against speed limits was that they were not the most effective way of restraining motorists, since inevitably "the maximum speed becomes the minimum speed. If you enact that they shall not go at more than 20 mph, they go at 20 mph."

Other speakers were not convinced. Mr Soares, who followed Long, saw the Bill as aiming to place the county councils "under the heel of the Local Government Board. . . . This is a Bill dealing with an amusement which is indulged in principally by wealthy people. . . . If we wanted an instance that this is . . . a government of the rich, for the rich and by the rich, I do not think we could have a better example than we have in this Bill." At the end of this

attack Soares offered a concession. He would withdraw all his objections to the Bill if it were amended to give powers to control motor traffic not to the LGB, but to the county councils; and if a fixed speed limit were included.

Soares' seconder took the same line: "It would be detrimental to the interests of the rural districts and the village life of the country if the House of Commons does away with the speed limit and allows motorists to use these lanes in the manner they are attempting to do. . . ." He made the same offer as Soares, with the even more moderate qualification that any speed limit imposed might be increased if necessary. Other speakers made the same points again and again. The extremists, like Mr Muntz, argued that common sense demanded a speed limit of 12 mph or, like Mr Gurdon, that money penalties were useless as a deterrent and that flogging might be more effective. This was a Bill for the benefit of a privileged minority and to the detriment of the community as a whole, and consequently, argued Mr Burdett-Coutts, should have been introduced in the Commons. Almost every speaker demanded a speed limit. Montagu was left almost alone, pleading that the coming of cars would never affect the riding of horses, that motorists would lose far more than they would gain from the Bill even as it stood, that cars could now be bought for between one and two hundred pounds and were thus within the reach not only of the rich, but of "anyone who can own a brougham and pair of horses, or even a dog-cart".

Seeing himself and the motorists isolated, Long backed down. Having already agreed to introduce a driving test as a condition of getting a licence, he rose towards the end of the debate to say that, although he could not leave the question of a speed limit to the judgment of the House alone, he recognised the general feeling in the House. He knew it represented strong feeling in the country at large. He was prepared to consider the possibility of a maximum speed limit at the committee stage, although he would not accept that those who broke it should be imprisoned.

The promise changed the whole nature of the Bill. The Automobile Club, after some hesitation, decided that the Bill should now be blocked and defeated in the certain expectation that a better Bill would soon be brought forward. Montagu was asked to throw the weight of his group of MPs against it. The Club Committee wrote to Long that, except from a public point of view, the Bill was now of

practically no advantage to motorists; they could support it only if the speed limit were not less than 25 mph, and if their other long-standing demands were met.⁸³ The *Automotor Journal* declared the Bill to be a fiasco, and better defeated.⁸⁴ But *The Times*, deftly abandoning its previous point of view, applauded Long's promise and his statesmanship in yielding to the spirit of the House: "It was manifest that the House of Commons and the constituencies were determined to insist on a speed limit, and that the Bill would have been wrecked if it had been refused."⁸⁵

Montagu and the other 'motoring' MPs discussed their tactics. They agreed with Long and *The Times* – according to Montagu's later account⁸⁶ – that the government risked losing the Bill unless the speed limit were accepted. On the fairly certain assumption that this limit would be not less than 25 mph, they agreed to support the government's compromise. They wrote to Long before the start of the committee stage, telling him this and making some detailed points about penalties under the Bill.

When the committee discussions began on August 7, Long suggested a maximum general speed limit of 25 mph.⁸⁷ A counter-amendment was moved, for 15 mph. One speaker, amid cries of "No", hoped that the motorists would, as a compromise, accept his amendment proposing 20 mph. The rest of the discussion was straight horse-trading. Some speakers proposed 15 mph, some 25 mph or higher, others expressed dissatisfaction with the whole situation but offered to accept 20 mph in the interests of a quiet life and of preserving the Bill. Long's course was clear. The argument, he said, was not about whether to have a limit or not – that had been decided – but about the choice between 20 and 25 mph. He was not prepared to accept 15; and given the committee's general sense towards compromise, he felt that the most business-like procedure would be to accept 20 as a middle figure. In the voting, the 15 mph proposal was defeated as easily as was 25 mph. The compromise of 20 mph was accepted without a division.

Three things characterised the rest of the committee's discussions. First, the ready acceptance of a halfway house on many issues, with the implication that in the absence of firm guidelines for policy a reasonable man would not want to go to extremes. Thus a proposal to reduce fines for first offences, for the benefit of small men and especially of motor-cyclists, was easily defeated; but there was even less support for a proposal of Redmond's that a second offence

should be punishable not with a fine, but with imprisonment ("he believed it would do some of these flying millionaires all the good in the world"). Secondly, the number of points which were met by an assurance from Long that the matter would be covered by regulations to be issued by the LGB. Many questions of detail and of administration – such as the criteria for the granting of local speed limits – went entirely undiscussed. The third factor was closely related to the other two. The government's evident anxiety, as the debate progressed – the second and final day of the Commons committee stage was on August 11, the day before grouse-shooting began – to get the Bill into law before the recess appeared to take precedence over everything else.⁸⁸ Long did not press the question of driving tests, on which he had promised to draft an amendment; having dismissed, as too difficult to administer, Montagu's proposal that tests should be conducted by experts appointed by the LGB, he proposed simply that drivers should satisfy local councils that they were competent. But after a desultory brief discussion, he declared that he would leave the whole question to the discretion of the committee. It was defeated by 51 votes to 74. No test of driving ability was to be required on British roads until 1935. On other issues Long did not offer even a reasoned discussion; early on the second day he greeted an amendment by remarking that its mover

did not realise that there was considerable interest at stake on this Bill passing through the House, and on its operation after it passed; and if the Hon. Gentleman insisted on moving Amendments of this kind in future, he would be doing the greatest possible damage to the motor traffic of this country.

The Commons discussed the Bill till 2 a.m. on Saturday, August 12. The same day Lord Balfour presented the amended Bill to the Lords in a brief speech.⁸⁹ The only major amendment made by the Commons, he said, was the insertion of a speed limit. He still disapproved of speed limits; but it would have been impossible to get the Bill through the Commons without it. There was much hostility in the country towards the discourtesy and inconsiderateness of motorists, who – although the press did not bring this out – were often not members of the gentry. The British public were not jealous of others amusing themselves, whatever their social class, and the aim of the Bill was not to destroy the motor industry, but to restrain those who had abused the power of the motor car. After all, the

Bill would be in force only for three years; by the end of that time, the public would have become more used to cars, and the small minority of offenders, now made identifiable by the provisions of the Bill, would have been punished and weeded out. For the Opposition, Lord Spencer was equally dubious about speed limits, but, he said, he preferred an amended Bill to no Bill at all. The Commons amendments were agreed to.

The Act, as finally passed, contained two quite separate provisions for regulating the speed of cars: Section 1, which made it an offence to drive a motor car on the public highway recklessly, or negligently, or at a speed or in a manner dangerous to the public, having regard to all the circumstances*; and Section 9, imposing the 20-mph speed limit and empowering the LGB to impose limits of 10 mph at the request of the local authority.

This was not what any of the motorists had hoped for. Many felt that they had been let down by the government and by their leaders, and the quarrel between moderates and die-hards broke out again as furiously as ever. The *ACJ* viewed the Act "with indignation and alarm".⁹⁰ The *Automotor Journal* thought the Act worse than nothing, and likely to cripple, if not annihilate, the motor industry. Not only the opponents of motoring, but its supine and inept friends were to blame: what had happened to the 120-odd MPs who were said to have promised to support Montagu in the Commons? The *Autocar* thought the Act "a disgrace to an engineering country", and blamed the Lords' failure to resist the amendments made by the Commons on indifference and eagerness to be on the grouse moor. But it did not think the Act should seriously inconvenience the ordinary motorist, although the speed limit might kill the very high-powered cars. But motorists must ensure that their rights were not infringed; they must organise; and the paper took the chance to put in a plug for the Motor Union – as opposed to the unrepresentative Automobile Club. One or two views were moderate. The *Glasgow Motor-Car World* objected to the opportunities now offered to the "notoriously untruthful constable eager for promotion" to catch visiting motorists, but suggested that most drivers had no real objection to the speed limit; this would certainly not

* Which included "the nature, condition and use of the highway, and the amount of traffic which actually is at the time, or might reasonably be expected to be, on the highway".

ruin the British motor industry, since most high-speed cars were imported.⁹¹

The mood of recrimination bred a need for scapegoats. *Motoring Illustrated* blamed certain motorists who had rashly rushed in and forced the passage of legislation, confident of results, rather than waiting "until a saner public opinion should prevail". Claude Johnson and Montagu were especially to blame "for mistakenly insisting that they were in a position to make terms with the government".⁹² This was very much the mood of the Automobile Club. Having issued some despairing statements to the press about the likely effects of the Act on motoring and the motor industry, the Club now turned on Montagu. Even Johnson accused him of having unnecessarily given way to Long, when he should have taunted Long with going back on all he had previously said about the dangers of fixed speed limits: "the fruits of our campaign are thrown away because the government, the House and the public cannot now have the slightest idea that we were fighting for a certain thing, and meant in the long-run to get it". Russell described the Act as "the fruit of irrational prejudice and ignorant dislike rushed into legislation in a moment of panic". He told Montagu that he had always opposed the idea of trying to bargain with the government, on the grounds that "at the last moment Ministers would throw us over".⁹³ The Club passed a vote of no confidence in Montagu and withdrew their support from him as spokesman in the House of Commons.

Montagu himself was unrepentant. In a long account in *The Car*,⁹⁴ he insisted that the new situation was better than maintaining the *status quo*. The hysterical tone of the *Automobile Club Journal* could only damage its cause. In any case, if the government were determined to yield to pressure, motorists were still too small a minority to prevail. If the government had held out, the Opposition – if in office before the next session – might have introduced more stringent measures still. The Parliamentary motorists had felt it best to put their efforts into trying to make the present Bill as tolerable as possible ("I am sure some day everyone will say we were right"). Motorists should now accept the Bill as a fact, and wait for the inevitable revolution at the end of three years.

Long, too, was prepared to stand by the Act he had got. Five years later he was to tell the Commons that the speed limit had been inserted "against his wishes", and against the wishes, he thought of

most of his party. "But it was the manifest opinion of the House at that time, and to that opinion they bowed."⁹⁵

Henry Sturmev, a car manufacturer, wrote to Long complaining that the Bill had led to cancellation of orders for cars. "Cannot something be done to save the industry from ruin? It is the duty of governments to assist, and not to ruin, British industries. Can you not withdraw the Bill, or refer to a Royal Commission?" Long's private secretary replied, in a letter released to the press, that, although the Bill would discourage demand for high-speed cars, this did not matter. It was risky to invest in production of such cars, both because the demand for them was limited and might vanish and because the nuisance and panic they created had threatened "to involve the whole practice of motor driving in such a wave of execration as might very conceivably have succeeded in sweeping the motorist altogether off British roads for several years to come". Long concluded that he hoped the Act would lead the British industry to produce "moderately-engined reliable cars to go at a moderate speed and adapted to the purse of the man of moderate means".⁹⁶

However, Long sympathised with the difficulties of the less extreme motorists. Two days after the committee's discussion of the speed limit, he wrote to Montagu:

Let me thank you for the part you played in our very difficult task on Friday. Your position was a peculiarly delicate and hard one and I hope you will allow me to say that I thought you displayed very great ability, courage and moderation. I consider that the motor world are under a very great debt of gratitude to you. Please accept my warm thanks for your kindness and consideration."⁹⁷

In October, the Automobile Club grudgingly accepted that Montagu and the other motorist MPs had at least done their best; resolutions were passed healing the breach. The *Journal* concluded that the most important thing would be the use made by local authorities of their power under the Act to impose speed limits.⁹⁸ *The Times* barely referred to motor cars or their problems again that year. On January 1, 1904, the Act came into effect. It was to regulate the use of motor vehicles on British roads for the next twenty-seven years.

2

ALL THE STRAWBERRIES WERE SPOILED

The Motor Car and the Roads Problem

There is no evidence that the Motor Car Act had any effect on the fortunes, or even on the manufacturing policy, of the British motor industry. It certainly had little effect on the demand for cars. When the first national registration figures were collected, in March 1904, there were 8,500 cars in use. The figure had nearly doubled, to 16,000, within a year, and by 1907 had more than doubled again.¹ By 1900 59 firms had been founded; another 220 were set up by 1905. Although by 1905 over 80 of all these firms had failed, the capital invested came to perhaps £5½ million, and 17,000 men were employed. By 1907, the annual output of cars and chassis was 11,700.²

The industry at this time had two main characteristics. First, it was dominated by foreign manufacturers, especially French; imports from France and Germany continued at a high rate until the war, both of complete cars and of chassis which were made up in the firms' English factories (such as that of Darracq in Fulham).³ Secondly, a large proportion of the vehicles made and in use continued to be private cars. The statistics for commercial vehicles are extremely unreliable; but it seems fair to assume that, compared with the 32,500 private cars registered in early 1907, not more than a quarter of this number of commercial vehicles of all types were in use.*

* None of the statistics are wholly reliable. The figures above for private cars derive from the returns kept by Customs; but an enquiry by the LGB in September 1905 produced very different results, showing over 30,000 private cars registered at that date.⁴ All figures based on registrations are likely to be inflated, since a car changing hands would often be re-registered in a second authority without cancelling the first registration. The only thing on which all the contemporary estimates agree is that private (or 'pleasure') cars outnumbered all other motor vehicles. The LGB enquiry found a total of just over

The relevance of this second fact was that the 'motor problem' in all its aspects – with one exception – continued to be seen largely as a problem caused by the private motorist. This impression was reinforced by the energy and social prominence of the motoring organisations, and by the industry's own inevitable concern with the fortunes of the private car. All this strengthened the case of the critics of the motor vehicle who wanted to show, for instance, that hard-working draught-horses were being panicked, and the rural economy damaged, by a gang of thoughtless pleasure-seekers. (The single salient exception to this was the London motor-bus, which in the early 1900s caused so many fatal accidents, and was so widely regarded as a threat to the city's amenities, that a Select Committee was set up in 1912 to deal exclusively with this problem.)⁸

The 8,000 (or possibly more) motorists of 1904 waited apprehensively to learn what regulations the LGB would make under the Act. The LGB had in fact already taken a typically negative step; in a circular sent to all local authorities in November 1903, it had asked them not to propose local speed limits until it had been established that the other provisions of the Bill were inadequate to secure the public safety.⁹ The LGB's attitude was made very plain in an argument that burst out in the Cabinet in the summer of 1904 when the Office of Works, without consulting other departments, published regulations laying down speed limits of 10 mph for the London parks. Walter Long and Murray, the Secretary of State for Scotland, at once circulated a pained memorandum.¹¹ They pointed out that they were responsible for processing applications from local authorities for 10-mph limits. Most authorities had taken the 'correct' view, and were content not to introduce new limits, but to rely on Section 1 of the Act, imposing penalties for dangerous driving.* But many had pressed for local limits, which made it all the

6,000 trade and passenger vehicles.⁵ As late as 1906 the *Economist* estimated that not more than one-seventh of all the motor vehicles in use were commercial.⁶ The SMMT told the Royal Commission of 1905 that up till the middle of that year their members had delivered just over 10,000 cars "for professional or commercial purposes, as apart from purely pleasure purposes".⁷ The last is probably the most reliable assessment; many of the 'cars' must in fact have been 'hackneys', i.e. buses and cabs, of which according to the separate licensing statistics kept by Customs there were over 7,000 by 1905.

* In the next 18 months, of the 275 local authorities entitled to apply for local prohibitions, restrictions or ten-mile limits, 56 did so; of these, only 17 reached the public enquiry stage; and finally, only four regulations were made.¹⁰

more important that every case should be considered with care so as not to establish a dangerous precedent. They went on:

We consider that the existence of the present Regulation in those parts of the Park which are used as public thoroughfares . . . will seriously hamper us in dealing with the application of local authorities elsewhere. It is, in our judgement, absurd to contend that a limitation to 10 mph in these places – a limitation which is not imposed in any of the crowded thoroughfares of London – is necessary in the interests of public safety. The question of amenity in these places seems to us equally out of the question; they are in use as ordinary traffic thoroughfares, and are not resorted to as are the parts of the park which are used for walking and pleasure driving.

Lord Windsor defended his Office's action. Regulations had to be made in the interests of the thousands of people, of all classes, who used the parks. There had been many complaints of the inconvenience caused by "quick-driven motors. . . . The question of amenity is of the utmost importance, and it is that upon which the case for the Regulation mainly rests. The proper use and enjoyment of the parks by all classes must be the first consideration." Windsor argued that to withdraw the regulation now would cause a public outcry.¹² The Regulation stood.* The following year the Office of Works banned all motor traffic in Hyde Park between 4 and 7 p.m. (The regulation remained in force until June 1910, when *The Times* commented that its removal "seemed to be generally appreciated".)¹⁴

But whatever happened about local 10-mph limits, the general 20-mph limit was in force everywhere. Far below the cruising speed of most cars, it was widely disregarded. The police took full advantage of this. 'Trapping' became universal; and although some chief constables, when questioned, would claim that they set traps only on dangerous stretches of road, to discourage speeding there, most found it easier to catch motorists on the wider, straighter and emptier roads. In the year ending July 1905, proceedings were taken against 983 motorists for exceeding the 20-mph limit (and against a further 250 for going more than 10 mph in the Royal parks). Those who

* Partly because, at least in matters concerning the Royal parks, the King's views carried some weight. Windsor told Akers-Douglas that it would be very difficult to withdraw the regulations because both the King and Queen "have strong opinions as to the necessity of the speed limit in the Parks because the police cannot act under so vague a definition as the 'convenience of the public' when 'danger' is not in question . . .".¹³

were convicted were fined an average of £3. 14s. od. each* (compared with a possible maximum of £10 for a first, £20 for a second offence.)¹⁵ Motorists deeply resented both the police action and the particular form it took; Henry Norman wrote:

It is against all good government to detach police from their proper duties, disguising them in absurd clothing, and causing them the humiliation of hiding in ditches, in order to create an artificial offence by the clumsy use of inaccurate stopwatches, largely in order that the county rates may be relieved at my expense.

Motorists supported these criticisms with an argument which has been increasingly used in this context ever since. Norman put it concisely:

It is an axiom of good legislation that a law unjust in itself, and against the good sense and conscience of a large part of the community, cannot be enforced. The imposition of a fixed speed limit for automobiles in all circumstances is a law of this kind. It is not enforced, it can never be.¹⁶

The other main provision of the Act was used even more liberally. In 1904/5, over 1,500 motorists were charged with driving furiously, negligently, recklessly or to the danger of the public. The average fine was £3. 16s. od. (compared with maxima of £20 and £50).¹⁷ But none of this solved the motor problem. A growing number of accidents and injuries throughout 1904 produced a furious and prolonged correspondence in *The Times* under the general heading "The motor tyranny". The Highways Protection League was formed, with the expressed aim of opposing not the motor car, but the misuse of the highway by a selfish minority. (This did not prevent the Automobile Club from dismissing it as "manifestly aimed at the motorist".) By the middle of 1905 the 'motor problem' was as severe as it had ever been. For some reason an accident in April at Markyate, in which a child was killed by a chauffeur-driven car belonging to Hildebrand Harmsworth, became a national *cause célèbre*. *The Times* condemned the minority of reckless drivers, and demanded action by motorists generally and by Parliament.¹⁸ The chairman of the Automobile Club, Arthur Stanley,† said that when

* A considerable sum, equivalent to about £22 at 1969 prices.

† Hon. Arthur Stanley (1869-1947): Conservative MP, 1898-1918. Chairman, RAC, 1905-7 and 1912-36. GBE, 1917.

the Act came up for revision the following year, the Club would try to protect the public against reckless driving, while combining to safeguard their own legitimate interests as motorists.¹⁹ For all the controversy it had aroused, the Motor Car Act might never have been passed.

Politically, the situation was extremely confused. The most obvious characteristics of the motor car were that it was dangerous and that it caused dust. The second of these was by far the more important. There were two aspects to it. In the first place dust was disagreeable in itself; people who lived, worked or grew produce beside the roads, or liked to stroll or ride or cycle along them, were all offended by the swirling clouds of grit that covered everything within twenty yards of the highway. Market gardeners found their lettuces unsaleable, householders their property values depreciating, writers their typewriters clogged and unusable (or so they claimed). The prevention of dust became a major objective of motor-car design, and the Automobile Club held many trials with patent vehicles and accessories. The 10-mph limit in London parks which had so irritated Long had not been based on safety reasons; it was simply the maximum speed which seemed not to raise unendurable quantities of dust, established after experiments carried out in Richmond Park by Windsor himself, using his own car and with his Permanent Secretary as assistant.²⁰

But, secondly, dust *was* the road, broken down by heavy vehicles and flung into the air by the faster light ones, to the consequent expense of the local ratepayers. It was a question of finance rather than of emotion, amenity or even safety – and it had the political weight appropriate to this. The county councils were quite content to see motor traffic develop, kept suitably safe by legislation, and were not even convinced of the need for a speed limit; but they felt strongly that it was the motorist, not the rural ratepayer, who should pay for the damage done to the roads. As the clerk of the Notts County Council observed: “After the enormous expenditure by county councils to fit the roads to horse-drawn traffic, it is disconcerting to find that much of the expenditure is wasted, and that further large sums may have to be spent.”²¹ It was of course this, not simple malice, which was responsible for the large fines levied by county magistrates on motorists, for until 1920 the proceeds of these fines went straight to the relief of the rates. Nonetheless, criticisms of motorists which may have rested on considerations of finance were

often expressed in terms that motorists could reasonably find malicious. Typical was a public denunciation of motors by a rural notable at an agricultural show in the north of England:

They were a hideous sort of thing, and the occupants were generally dressed up in a manner more representing monkeys than anything else. They travelled along at what they considered their legal rate – he supposed 20 mph – killing and maiming men, women and children, and driving everyone else from the roads with their hideous noise and wretched dust. Still farmers were obliged to contribute largely towards the cost of maintaining the roads, which these hideous things did so much to destroy.²²

Other issues, and other interests, were of course involved. The breeders, fanciers and users of horses were perhaps the major lobby, ranging from Lord Willoughby de Broke (who had several valuable racehorses killed or injured by a runaway car) to the London horse-cab drivers.²³ The situation was alleged by the motorists to be exacerbated by the promise of promotion for police who caught motoring offenders.

However divided on points of detail, opinion was widely agreed on the existence of a problem. The situation threatened to get entirely out of hand in the spring and summer of 1905. A series of rows in the Automobile Club in the six months after the passing of the Act culminated in a struggle for control which was won by a 'reform party' including Montagu, Stanley, Russell and other prominent motorists. A new committee, consisting entirely of candidates put up by this group, was elected. United again, the Club then invited the Duke of Sutherland to become president and Lords Dudley, Onslow and Stanley to become vice-presidents. All accepted, and the Club's prestige and dignity were thus acknowledged.²⁴ But it was the very dignity of the Club which made it quite ineffectual in the undignified guerilla war between the motorists and the police. The same was true of the MU. Seeing no move by either body, individual motorists took to direct action in an attempt to beat the police. In March a private motorist, Walter Gibbons, wrote to the *Autocar* suggesting a national 'Motorists' Protection Association for the Prevention of Police Traps'. Two other motorists, Charles Jarrott and William Letts, wrote three weeks later to say that arrangements had actually been made for a special staff of cyclists to patrol the Brighton road and, in effect, to warn motorists of police traps. The first patrols were out at weekends during April.

THE MOTOR CAR AND POLITICS: 1896-1970

The informal organisation which grew up out of this operation rapidly coalesced; in August a committee was elected, rules were adopted, a full-time paid secretary (Stenson Cooke*) was appointed, and the Automobile Association was under way.²⁵

The problem was discussed in Parliament in June 1905, when the anti-motorists once again attacked the LGB.²⁶ Mr Cathcart Wason, who two years before had been proud to boast there were no cars at all in his Orkney constituency, made a violent though confused personal attack on Walter Long, now at the Irish Office. Wason claimed that Long had in effect promised in 1903 that the LGB would exercise reasonably the discretion given to it to decide on local speed limits, and that this pledge had been ignored. Long, in reply, "regretted that so good cause had found such a poor advocacy. . . . He shared the view that the users and drivers of motor cars abused their privileges and had given the public good cause for complaint." Other critics supported Wason's attack on the LGB, deplored the inadequacy of the penalties in the Act, quoted the resentment of the rural population: "Why should ten or twenty thousand people be allowed to ride rough-shod over the great bulk of the population? . . ."

For the motorists, Arthur Stanley, the chairman of the Automobile Club, spoke in moderate terms of the misleading publicity given to motor cars. He also hoped for the 'nationalisation' of certain major routes, such as the Great North Road. The President of the LGB, Gerald Balfour, replied.† It was important not to strangle the motor industry, but the danger and the dust must be dealt with. "Something could be done by LGB administration, more by increased stringency on the part of local authorities and the police, and a good deal by legislation." But he had no positive suggestions for legislation. He could propose only that there should be a full enquiry by a committee or commission into the working of the Act.

Balfour, not a notably dynamic politician – never again holding office after 1905, he spent much of the remaining forty years of his life dabbling in spiritualism – was doing no more than his officials had suggested he should. The brief which they prepared for his

* Stenson Cooke (1874-1942): Secretary of the AA, 1905-42. War Office, 1915-17. An enthusiastic amateur fencer, and author (e.g. *This Motoring*) of some of the most embarrassing prose of the interwar period. Knighted 1933.

† Gerald Balfour (1861-1949). Chief Secretary for Ireland 1895-1900; President, Board of Trade, 1900-5; President, LGB, 1905. Succeeded brother as Earl Balfour, 1930.

intervention in this debate has survived,²⁷ and makes very clear the unease and uncertainty felt by administrators whose main concern was normally to see that other agencies did their several duties efficiently, when faced with a national problem and demands for central action. With the air of men faced by some bizarre natural phenomenon, Gerald Balfour's advisers told him that although the growing numbers of motor cars showed that they were both useful and popular, they were "by many regarded as a source of alarm and danger, and they cause many accidents". (To illustrate this last point, they attached a sheaf of press cuttings about the accident at Markyate.) They were also a great nuisance in dry and dusty weather. But "their existence and their many disagreeable qualities will no doubt have to be tolerated". It would simply be a question of whether to place on them further restrictions, in the form of speed limits, or otherwise to reduce the danger and inconvenience which they caused. This problem had to be faced, for it was certain that the question of renewing or amending the 1903 Act would cause the whole conflict to be rekindled.

The same air of detachment pervades the LGB's description of the administration of the existing law (which was, after all, being widely blamed for the current situation). They recalled the circular they had issued to local authorities discouraging applications for speed limits, and Wason's claim that this had infringed the discretion of authorities. "Actually", they commented, "it does nothing of the kind, but it is true that the policy of the Department has been to discourage the imposition of speed limits in cases where no strong case is made out." By an ingenious circular argument they then produced both a technical and a political justification for this policy. All the applications had related to towns; it was alleged that the amount of traffic made high speed dangerous. But, argued the LGB, if traffic was heavy, vehicle speeds were automatically kept low and speed limits were unnecessary; if there was no traffic, the argument in terms of danger fell to the ground. (In any case, they added, in towns traffic was "more or less controlled by the police", which again made limits superfluous.) Looking at the politics of the problem, they conceded that had there been a general demand from local authorities for limits, this would have been hard to resist. But there had not; most authorities had been content to rely on the dangerous driving provisions in Section 1. (This was hardly surprising, given that the LGB had been urging them since November

1903 not to ask for speed limits, and had done their best to smother such applications as had been made.) This in itself, the LGB suggested, was adequate reason for not allowing any speed limits "in a few isolated cases not specially distinguishable from other places where no application has been made". It was a striking attempt to claim that the efficient application of a policy was its own justification.

Even the LGB admitted that there were arguments other than administrative convenience. They noted on speed limits in general that

they are unsatisfactory as leading to police traps and much dispute, that apart from the question of dust, speed in itself is not a danger or inconvenience to the public outside the car [a strange claim given the inclusion in the brief of the Markyate material] and that inasmuch as the main advantage of the motor car is its increased locomotive power, it would rob it of its essential value to limit it to a maximum speed of 10 mph – less than the maximum speed of a horse-drawn vehicle.

But behind all the surface arguments about speed, dust, limits, police traps, lurked the awareness that, in the end, tinkering would not do. The last paragraphs of the LGB brief raised the issue which underlay all the others – how to pay for the roads. They pointed out that the taxation of light cars was far from heavy (£1 registration fee, and 5 shillings per year). There might be a case for some kind of annual tax on all motor vehicles. The argument for thus getting motorists to pay for the damage they did was that it might defuse demands that the state should intervene: "There is no doubt that the use of the roads by motor cars will foster the demand for the nationalisation of the highways, and it is possible that this demand might be allayed by the introduction of some system for the further taxation of these vehicles."

It was becoming clear that something would have to be done about the roads. This had been at the root of the cyclists' agitation for twenty years; having founded the Roads Improvement Association in 1886, they had used it both for research and experimentation and for lobbying ever since. The driving force behind the RIA was William Rees Jeffreys, who had argued in 1902, in an article called "The Motor Problem – a Roads Problem", that the solution to the danger and inconvenience caused by cars lay not in keeping them

off the roads, but in improving the roads for the cars. In 1901 the Royal Commission on Local Taxation had recommended that main roads should be considered "a subject of national importance which need not be entirely financed by the ratepayers, and that they should be in part supported by grants out of the central exchequer".²⁸ No action followed on this recommendation; the RIA, which had meanwhile been sponsoring experiments in road improvement such as tar and oil spraying, continued to press for action. Stanley, Montagu and Russell joined the RIA council in 1901, and in August lent their weight to an RIA deputation to Walter Long at the LGB. The deputation demanded the establishment of a separate Highway Commission, or at the very least a new department of the LGB, with complete control over the country's roads. Half the cost of maintaining main roads should be met from the Exchequer, out of national taxation, and the LGB should take powers to create new large highway authorities to put an end to the fragmented and inefficient system still in being.²⁹

Despite some support for these demands from MPs of all parties, and favourable comment in *The Times*, Long was not moved. But the RIA continued to press, and in early 1903 a Departmental Committee of the LGB was set up, chaired by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Board; four of its eight members were members also of the Automobile Club.³⁰ Reporting later the same year, the Committee recommended that all roads should be classified as national, county, or district, and should attract grants in aid at rates varying according to the classification. The new system was to be supervised by a special department of the LGB. New county road boards should take over the powers of the smaller highway authorities in their districts (reducing the 1,000 separate authorities to little over 60), and should have powers of compulsory purchase and power to build by-passes. Rees Jeffreys declared these conclusions "a triumph for the RIA".³¹

No action followed. Rees Jeffreys saw this as entirely due to the *laissez-faire* attitude of the LGB, epitomised in a remark which he alleged had been made to him by an LGB official: "We are not here to take the initiative, but to sit in judgement upon such schemes and proposals as the local authorities bring before us."³²

But action, of whatever sort, could not long be postponed. At the end of June 1905, a private member's bill proposing much more severe penalties for motoring offences – £20 or one month for a first

law against reckless, negligent or dangerous driving, which in itself is necessarily a menace to all other users of the roads. But the enforcement of a maximum speed limit does not command the same unanimous support and sympathy.³⁸

They accordingly recommended that the general speed limit should be abolished, but that it should be open to local authorities to adopt 12-mph limits in particularly dangerous places. (Henry and Monro dissented. It was not that the law had failed, but that it had been unevenly and not very effectively administered. The public interest required that the general speed limit should be kept, whether it was enforced or not, ready to be used when appropriate.)

The Commission clearly were deeply impressed by the problem of dust. They discussed it at great length with many witnesses, and in their report quoted verbatim from some of this evidence: such as that of a railwayman living in the country who complained that he now came home from a Sunday afternoon walk "as if I had come out of a flour mill. Instead of coming home with an appetite for your tea and feeling benefited by your country walk, you come home tired, and jaded, and irritated"; or that of Miss Everett-Green, an author:

All the plants under glass were spoiled, all the flowers were spoiled, all the strawberries and grapes were spoiled, and our health was injured. I had an inflamed throat all the summer and my eyes were very troublesome. . . . I had to get new typewriters. I had got new typewriters in 1902 and I had to change them again this year, they got so gritty.³⁹

The Commission discussed the possibility of designing dustless cars, but concluded that it was a chimera. The only adequate answer was dustless roads. But these were extremely expensive. The Commission thought it would be unreasonable to expect the rate-payers, even with the prospect of reducing the dust nuisance, to meet this expense unless they were given some help from other sources.

This was the crux of the motor-car problem. Its implications were enormous. It was not simply that taxation, presumably of motor cars, would have to be increased, although any increase – in a society in which the standard rate of income tax was one shilling – would be unpopular enough. The revenue raised would need distribution, which implied some criteria for distribution, which

implied a further expansion of the administrative machine and a further extension of central control over local authorities. Faced with the reluctance of the LGB to take this task upon itself, or to consider 'nationalising' the roads system, the motorists had been working towards a solution of their own. The proposal which they put forward to the Royal Commission, as refined and adopted by the government, was to affect thinking about roads finance and to shape the politics of motor taxation from that day to the present.

The Club advocated a national 'road fund', to be administered by a central highway department, and to be used in helping to maintain and improve main roads. A witness for the Club told the Commission that motorists "would be willing to pay more towards the cost of the roads if they were made so efficient that they would not be a nuisance to the public and if they have reasonable treatment when they are on the road". Another Club witness was asked, whether, as the sum grew, a later Chancellor of the Exchequer might not be tempted to take it over for Imperial taxation. He did not think this likely: "Any recommendation made by this Commission in the direction of ear-marking that money would probably carry such very great weight that no Chancellor of the Exchequer would venture to disregard it."⁴⁰

Later, the Commission asked the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, Sir George Murray, for his views on this proposal. He was not enthusiastic. He felt that a fund fed only from the taxation on private cars, at current rates, would be small. He did not think it feasible to greatly increase the tax on private cars. Even if the fund were – improbably – large enough to justify setting up a central body to administer it, local authorities would probably not welcome bringing the central government into the business of inspecting main roads; and central government itself, already over-burdened, would certainly object.^{41*}

The Commission were not deterred by the Treasury's objections. They noted that the proposal to devote motor taxation revenue to road improvement was "generally accepted". To secure an adequate revenue, and to establish some relationship between tax rates and

* Sir G. H. Murray (1849–1936). Treasury 1880–97; Chairman, Board of Inland Revenue, 1897–9; Secretary, Post Office, 1899–1903; Permanent Secretary, Treasury, 1903–11. Privy Councillor 1910. Beatrice Webb, meeting him on the Reconstruction Committee at the end of the war, thought him "a simple-minded reactionary".

damage done to the roads, the taxation on motor vehicles should be graduated by weight. Trade vehicles should pay at half the rate of 'pleasure' vehicles. The money should go to a central department, which should make grants to local authorities, not for mere repairs, but for improvements aimed at producing better and less dusty surfaces.

By the time the report was published, in July 1906, the Liberals were in office. Although the report seems to have made little impact on the public at large, the motorists were satisfied with it. The Automobile Club and the Motor Union had gathered together a great deal of evidence in support of their case; it was assembled in a printed volume, and was copiously drawn on by Rees Jeffreys in his evidence for the associations. The Commission showed some impatience with Jeffreys as a witness, challenging his verbal evidence at many points. This becomes easier to understand in the context of the printed material, which was also submitted to the Commission; it was a farrago of largely undigested, sometimes unsubstantiated, occasionally hearsay evidence of the benefits conferred by the motor car and of the unreasonable prejudice of its critics. Thus, it included statements about motoring by 'men of moderate means'; statements by public figures condemning the speed limit; lists of police traps, with assertions of their ill effects; declarations by doctors of the value to them both of their cars and of exceeding the speed limit in an emergency; assertions about the high and dangerous speeds achieved by trams, bicycles, and horse-drawn vehicles; and much other unquantifiable evidence such as: "The local county bench, of which I am a member, are prejudiced against motorists, and ready to inflict fines out of all proportion to the offence, or alleged offence."⁴² The Commission simply treated much of this evidence as inadmissible ("We do not propose to burden the notes with these enormous masses of figures").

The AC/MU had asked for the abolition of the speed limit; that licences be endorsed only for serious offences; for the right of appeal to Quarter Sessions; for notice of prosecutions to be given within seven days; and that all 'fines and fees' levied under the Motor Car Acts should be paid into the Exchequer and used for road improvements. They also condemned the suggestion of driving tests, on the grounds that experience had shown them to be useless from the point of view of public safety.

On behalf of the Club, Stanley, who had himself given evidence

to the Commission, commented on its report: "Our suggestions have been adopted almost in toto. . . . It only now remains for legislation to be introduced, based on the findings of the Commission, and I have no doubt that Parliament and the Government . . . will be able and willing without undue loss of time to promote a Bill. . . ." Rees Jeffreys' comment doubtless reflected his own experience of the Commission; the report "marks a great advance on the part of public opinion as reflected by a body of men who are by no means enthusiastic believers in the motor movement". He added that, useful though the abolition of the speed limit would be, for the public and the motorist, the recommendations about road administration and finance were more valuable.⁴³

The Liberal government, faced with this inheritance from their predecessors, reacted less positively. Speaking to the MU annual dinner in the autumn, the Parliamentary Secretary to the LGB, Walter Runciman,* made it clear only that any new system of taxation would not be based on 'horsepower'. The Commissioner for the Metropolitan Police, Sir Edward Henry, in equally negative mood implied that there might be no need for official action at all; he showed that the motor problem in London was solving itself, by comparing the rapid rise in car registrations with the slower increase in police summonses.⁴⁴

The regulation and the taxation of cars continued to be seen and dealt with as separate problems. The main change on the regulation side was the proposed abolition of the speed limit. This was naturally welcomed by the motorists. But Henry told the Home Office that it was essential to retain the limit.⁴⁵ The Home Office agreed. The Commission had ignored such evidence as there was: "Their wavering and sometimes highly disputable arguments . . . afford no sufficient support for their recommendation." On the other hand – as they told the LGB – neither simply abolishing nor relying exclusively on the speed limit would meet the case. There were many places in the country where cars could be driven for miles far above the limit without causing either danger or even inconvenience. They suggested that the limit should be kept, but combined with a provision allowing magistrates to dismiss a speeding case if they were satisfied that no danger or inconvenience had been caused. This should end the police practice of securing convictions by setting

* W. Runciman (1870–1949). *Inter alia* Parliamentary Secretary, LGB, 1905–7; President, Board of Trade, 1914–16 and 1931–7. Viscount, 1937.

traps on wide lonely roads – and would thus “remove the sense of hardship and injustice which such convictions now breed”.*

The importance of the police’s role in enforcing the law made their views impossible to ignore. It also inclined the Home Office to believe that they themselves could deal more effectively with the motor-car problem as a whole than could the LGB.

As soon as the Royal Commission had reported, officials reopened with Herbert Gladstone† a discussion which they had begun with his predecessor, Akers-Douglas.⁴⁶ They pointed out that nearly all the Commission’s recommendations concerned the police; it would be much easier for the Acts to be administered by the Home Secretary, leaving certain duties to the LGB. Many matters which now involved formal local enquiries, such as speed limit applications, could be just as well dealt with by the Home Office on the basis of a report by local police.

The Home Office and the LGB had already agreed informally that the LGB should hand over responsibility for the Motor Car Acts in return for taking from the Home Office housing, burials and some other matters. Officials now suggested that the Home Secretary should have a word with John Burns, the President of the LGB, while his own permanent secretary saw Burns’s, the notorious Provis.‡ The Ministers would in any case have to agree which department should take action on the Commission’s report and on any legislation that might follow from it.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Herbert Samuel,§ saw these papers on their way to Gladstone and tried to introduce some

* This coolly reasonable attitude was appropriate to a department which a then junior member of it later recalled as retaining “something of the grace, circumstance and leisure to which the young men who entered it from Oxford and Cambridge were accustomed in their comfortable Victorian homes” (Sir Harold Scott, *Your Obedient Servant*).

† H. Gladstone (1854-1930). Liberal Chief Whip 1899-1906. Home Secretary 1905-10, Governor-General, South Africa, 1910-14. Viscount 1914.

‡ Provis was regarded as so largely responsible for the lethargic attitude of the LGB that C. F. G. Masterman, offered an Under-Secretaryship at the LGB by Asquith, tried to make it a condition of his accepting that Provis should be moved. John Burns (1853-1943) had had a stormy youth as a radical trade union organiser, and in 1894 had been described by the Webbs as possibly ‘the most striking personality in the Labour movement’. But he grew increasingly conservative after becoming the first working-class Cabinet minister as President of the LGB, 1906-14.

§ Herbert Samuel (1870-1963). Later Postmaster-General, Home Secretary (twice), High Commissioner for Palestine. Viscount 1937.

principle into the discussion. The primary point, he said, was whether regulating motor traffic fitted better into the general tasks of one department or the other. "Questions whether one Department or the other is more overworked, whether a transfer of functions is owing between them, whether the LGB have made any promises on the subject . . . , are very relevant, no doubt, but are clearly secondary." In fact a glance at the Commission's recommendations showed that almost the whole subject fell within the Home Office's jurisdiction. Moreover, Runciman had told him that the LGB would be glad to be rid of motor cars – provided they got, in exchange, the Home Office's present responsibilities for lunatic asylums.

Gladstone was not a great success as Home Secretary (although he seems to have been popular with his civil servants), but on this matter he showed common sense, forethought and firmness. His manuscript minute on the file so clearly illustrates the differences in the way a Minister and his officials may see a situation, and is also such a good discussion of the problem of how to deal with this new phenomenon of which nobody knew much, that it is worth reproducing in full. He agreed with Samuel that the main question was who could best administer the law. The arguments for the Home Office were strong, but they were not conclusive.

Motor traffic being in its infancy, the regulations immature and insufficient, and public opinion swaying under violent and frequently ill-informed controversies about speed, dust, smell and safety, the inevitable consequence is constant police action. On the assumption that this state of things is to continue the case for Home Office jurisdiction might be irresistible. But it won't continue for ever, though it may last for a few years. I can imagine 60 years ago that quite as strong an argument might have been made out for giving railways to the Home Office. It is only reasonable to suppose that conflicting rights and claims will adjust themselves, and occasions for police traps and prosecutions will become far less frequent. . . . If so, the 200 police authorities will be as competent to deal with the question under the Local Administration as they are to deal with any other form of traffic. What will remain as a matter of large and general importance will be the effect of motor traffic on roads – and this is essentially a question for local authorities and the LG Board. . . .

There is one aspect of immediate importance. If the Home Office claims and secures this jurisdiction, it follows that we shall have to legislate next session. So far as I can see the LGB will have little parliamentary work until the great questions of Local Taxation

and Poor Law are taken up. . . . We have got to finish workmen's Compensation [and many other topics].

Gladstone summed up the arguments against taking on this new task:

At [the motor question's] initial stage of real difficulty we are to undertake at once administrative and legislative responsibility and be exposed to the harassing friction involved by a matter which touches everyone's comfort or interest, and then when this friction dies away we shall be saddled with business which would more naturally fall to the LGB.

But whatever the future may bring, I am not disposed to relieve the LGB *now* of the responsibility which is theirs in view of the heavy work which must fall to the Home Office next year. . . . By the way, I am not at all clear that the LGB is disposed to part with motor business. I think the President would like more not less. And I note that my predecessor appears to have given a definite *quid pro quo* to the Local Government Board.

There the matter was to remain.* Gladstone's was a fair summary of the position, and rested on a view of the road safety problem (that its solution lay not with the police, but with the highway engineers) which has since become much more widely accepted. But by his support for the *status quo* he left the responsibility for action with a department which, with little lead from John Burns, was to be increasingly pushed out of the mainstream of public business, and which was in any case not anxious to take action to deal with motor traffic. It was clear to the LGB that there was no agreement on what should be done about speed limits. Whatever solution was found, it would not deal with the dust problem; to abolish the general limit would clearly make the problem worse than ever. In the years that followed, the government, when asked its intentions on implementing the report, was to fall back on the double argument that opinion was so divided that it gave no guide to action, and that with the motor car only in its infancy it would be better to wait until further experience could make it possible to draft more effective legislation – the classic argument of those whose

* Home Office officials were defeated, but they were not convinced. Six years later the then Permanent Secretary told a Select Committee: "The motor car legislation is in the hands of the Local Government Board. That perhaps is rather surprising on the face of it, the regulation of motor car traffic being essentially a matter of police. . . ."47

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task it is to administer the *status quo*, that no bread is better than half a loaf. In July 1907, in a Lords debate, Russell asked the government what action it proposed to take on the report. He hoped that the speed limit would soon go and that no additional taxation would be imposed on cars. Another speaker argued that cars were no longer "generally detested by the agricultural classes", and that they provided much employment. In reply, the government spokesman regretted that the state of public business would make legislation impossible that year, but suggested that the delay was probably all to the good, since to postpone legislation "would go towards securing the best settlement in the light of further experience".⁴⁸ The RAC *Journal* allowed itself to feel flattered by this expression of the Ministry's regards, and added that it would be impossible to pigeonhole the Commission's report: roads were still so bad that inconsiderate drivers made themselves conspicuous, while the growing numbers of motor vehicles kept the question fresh.⁴⁹

However, another year passed, and nothing was done. In 1908, there was an outbreak of debates and questions in both Houses of Parliament, and the now familiar furious demands for action and promises of revolt in the country districts. "If the President of the LGB did not introduce next session a Bill dealing with this question he would find the people of the country would give a very strong expression of their intention not to sit quietly down and allow motor cars to be driven at any speed which the owners liked. . . ."⁵⁰ The attitude of the LGB was that unless public opinion was unanimous no action could be taken by the government; it would have to be left to the local authorities. The government's position is neatly represented by two statements made by their spokesmen within a fortnight of each other in July 1908:

On this question [the speed limit] precisely opposite opinions are held by motorists and the general public, and I can only repeat that the matter is receiving the attention of the Local Government Board. . . .

Both the Home Secretary and I [John Burns] are quite prepared to consider sympathetically any representations with a view to our actions when they emanate from local authorities, who are responsible and who, so far, have taken very little action."⁵¹

This was the characteristic tone of the LGB. In another debate

the same month, Burns pointed out with implied reproof that in the past two and a half years only 40 applications had been made for local speed limits; of these, all but four had been granted. But, he added, it seemed that now the police, the magistrates and the local authorities were starting to realise their responsibilities.⁵² He offered no view of what their responsibilities might be – which excused him from putting forward any evidence to support his claim that the situation was improving.

Even the LGB admitted that the situation was not improving very fast. In September it took some characteristically oblique action. A circular was sent to all county councils and the larger boroughs pointing out to them the hazards of motor traffic and suggesting means of dealing with these. It was a strikingly unhelpful document. It started by calling the attention of local authorities to “the danger and annoyance not infrequently caused by the driving of motor vehicles”. In the circumstances, this was surely a superfluous reminder. It then gave local authorities some useful tips for recognising inconsiderate drivers; these, the LGB explained, were characterised, among other qualities, by “disregard of the ordinary courtesies of the road and of the rights of wayfarers, . . . driving round corners at too high a speed, or on the wrong side of the road and the excessive use of the horn. . . .” Many suggestions had been made to the Board for imposing further restrictions on motor cars, but before taking any decision, they wished to draw attention to the existing law; speed limits had many disadvantages, and it should be possible to use the dangerous driving provisions to prevent “the flagrant, and in some instances wanton, abuse of the highway by inconsiderate or reckless drivers”. The circular went on to suggest that accidents could be reduced by improvements to the roads. Dust was not yet entirely preventable; but local authorities should keep themselves up to date on the subject.⁵³

This was little guide to action. There is no evidence that it had any effect. It certainly failed to impress the anti-motorists. The *Economist* – consistently hostile to the motor car – commented that it represented so slight a concession to the public demand for regulation of motor traffic that it might as well have been drafted by the MU. On the proposal that accidents should be prevented by road improvements, the paper commented: “Here public expenditure is calmly suggested in order to please the richest class of pleasure-seeker.”⁵⁴

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When a journal of the standing of the *Economist* could seriously protest at spending public money on trying to reduce accidents, sectional conflict was clearly obscuring public interest. From any point of view, the situation was now extremely unsatisfactory. By the beginning of 1909, there were six times as many cars as five years before, and public opinion on the subject was, if anything, more concerned. (In London the problem was exacerbated by the noise, smell and danger caused by motor buses, which brought the Home Office a continuing stream of complaints.) Lacking firm guidance from the centre, interested parties followed their own courses. The police continued to trap, the AA continued and expanded its system of scouts (causing some unease to the government in doing so, as is described in chapter 4), the campaigns of the anti-motorists became increasingly virulent and well-organised. The RAC *Journal* reproduced a handbill which, it had been told, was being 'extensively circulated' in Fulham, and which opened provocatively:

Men of England

Your birthright is being taken from you by reckless motor drivers. . . . Reckless motorists drive over and kill your children. . . . Reckless motorists drive over and kill both men and women.

Reckless motorists have compelled one hundred thousand people to withdraw their horses and carriages from the public roads. It is estimated that one hundred thousand men have been thrown out of work in consequence. . . .

Men of England . . . rise up, join together, and bring pressure upon your representatives in Parliament, and otherwise make it unpleasant and costly to the tyrants who endanger your lives and the lives of your dear ones. . . .⁵⁵

Some local authorities adopted measures very different from those advised by the LGB. When the Cumberland MU complained that certain roads were left covered in unrolled material, the Penrith RDC Highways Committee blandly replied that complaints from the MU would be ignored, but that all communications from rate-payers would receive respectful attention.⁵⁶ The Road Union and Highways Protection League distributed a pamphlet showing that motor vehicles had led to an increase both in road casualties and in the costs of road maintenance. In October 1908 the Prime Minister, Asquith, asked in the Commons if he would amend the Motor Car Act, agreed that there was considerable feeling against the inconsiderate driving of motor cars; but when, a week later, Wason asked

him to appoint a representative committee "to suggest legislation that might be passed by consent", Asquith got Burns to reply for him that opinions were too various for consent.⁵⁷ Nor was there any enthusiasm for Wason's alternative solution: that if the LGB would not act, local authorities should be given power to impose speed limits without reference to the department (as the Royal Commission had indeed proposed).

In April 1909 the chairman of the Motor Union, Joynson-Hicks,* described the state of Parliamentary opinion about motor vehicles in terms he could well have used before the passage of the Motor Car Act:

While a very large number of members of Parliament own motor cars, and still more are only too eager to avail themselves of the loan of cars during their elections, a large number – I fear the majority – are hostile to motoring.

This hostility, I think, is due to the vagaries of a very few 'road hogs'. . . . There are, further, a few members of Parliament who positively gloat over any bad accident, and bring it forward in the House for no other reason than to inflame the passions of their fellow-members against the owners of motor cars, while accidents through county council tramcars (which nearly always exceed their speed limit) or wagons travelling without lights are never so much as mentioned.⁵⁸

There were now about 45,000 cars on the roads. To many they symbolised the destructiveness of modern life and the sickness of contemporary society. Two years later, as sober a commentator as the Government's Chief Industrial Adviser, Sir George Askwith, singled out the ostentatious use of motor cars as one of the chief causes of labour unrest; he told the Cabinet that "the use of motor cars . . . cannot fail to attract the attention of those who might be unobservant of other even more lavish types of expenditure".⁵⁹

The Times suggested in 1912 that in America and France motoring was more 'democratic' because cars were cheaper. It added: "In this country much less would be heard of juggernauts and road-hogs . . . if motoring became more democratic."⁶⁰ C. F. G. Masterman

* William Joynson-Hicks (1865-1932). Solicitor and teetotaler, and long one of the motoring movement's prominent supporters. Conservative MP 1908-10, 1911-29. Postmaster-General 1923. Financial Secretary to Treasury (in Cabinet) 1923. Minister of Health 1923-4. Home Secretary 1924-9. Chairman of AA and MU and of Motor Legislation Committee. Created Viscount Brentford 1929.

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saw cars as typical of the by-products of industrial civilisation which it was the duty of governments to control; in his celebrated diatribe *The Condition of England*, published in 1909, he wrote:

Wandering machines, travelling with an incredible rate of speed, scramble and smash and shriek along all the rural ways. You can see them on a Sunday afternoon, piled 20 or 30 deep outside the new popular inns, while their occupants regale themselves within. You can see the evidence of their activity in the dust-laden hedges of the south country roads, a grey mud colour, with no evidence of green; in the ruined cottage gardens of the south country villages.⁶¹

3

MAKING A BARGAIN

The creation of the Road Fund

The Royal Commission's proposals for increased taxation and a central road fund were a formal recognition that the motor-car problem had to be dealt with through the roads. Writing a little later, Rees Jeffreys looked back at the history of the previous twenty years and exulted:

The dust raised by motor vehicles in two summers has accomplished what cyclists, notwithstanding their number, their organisation, and the agitation they have carried on for a number of years have been unable to effect. . . . The motor-car question is nine-tenths a road question. The main defence, by witnesses to the Royal Commission, even of the speed limit, finally resolved itself into one of the convenience of the public rather than their safety, as it was pointed out that the dust raised by motor cars increased largely with their speed.¹

The Government was at pains not to commit itself to any immediate action. In the Budget debates in the spring of 1907, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Asquith, briefly mused aloud on the subject of taxing motor cars. He had been much pressed to alter and to raise the duty on cars, and he was disposed to do so. A tax on cars would be "almost an ideal tax, because it is a tax on luxury which is apt to degenerate into a nuisance". But it was not yet practicable, since under present arrangements the proceeds would go to the (usually urban) local authority with which a car was registered, while the damage was done to the rural roads.²

The motorists themselves, and opinion at large, were more concerned about the immediate problems of dust, danger and the future of the speed limit, although the motorists were also anxious about the possibility of future tax increases (and urged, as did Russell in a Lords debate in the summer of 1907, that "motor cars have emerged from the stage of being the playthings of the rich and have become the ordinary means by which ordinary people go from place to place about their business"³). The government's refusal to show its hand

irritated some commentators, such as the *Economist*, which doubtless echoed the views of its middle-class readers when it complained in the autumn of 1907: "A large contribution from motorists to roads, if not to depreciated property, is already out of date, and Mr Asquith's postponement of the matter is hard to understand. . . ."⁴

By now, the previously informal divisions among the motorists were becoming institutionalised. The Royal Automobile Club,* despite the failure of the attempt to sever its connections with the trade, was becoming increasingly isolated in its role as club, with the select membership that that implies. By the spring of 1906 it had only 2,800 individual members (although many more were 'affiliated' through their membership of provincial clubs). Its aggressive offshoot, the Motor Union, already had over 11,000 members. The AA, founded in the summer of 1905, had under 1,000 members the following summer, and 3,000 by the end of 1906. This competition and growth created new strains. The difficulty of accommodating the MU within the framework of the RAC led to a separation at the end of 1907, followed by a short period of aggressive competition between the two organisations for each other's members. At the same time the MU, threatened in its capacity as the 'popular' organisation by the rise of the AA, resorted to blatantly imitative tactics, for instance in copying the AA's badge, motor insurance scheme and road patrols. Originally intended to act largely as political pressure group, it tried to reach agreement with the other organisations that this role should be reserved to it, while leaving the RAC to deal mainly with social and sporting affairs, and the AA to organise the road patrols. But this partition was never fully recognised, and the rivalry continued until the AA took over the MU in 1910.⁵

It was the Motor Union which finally took the initiative on motor taxation. Early in 1908 they sent a strong deputation to Asquith, still at the Treasury, to find out the state of his plans and to put forward their own proposals.⁶ Led by Joynson-Hicks, the deputation included representatives of the RAC and local clubs, 'medical motorists', motor cyclists, commercial users and the borough of Kingston-upon-Thames, and Rees Jeffreys, the secretary of the Motor Union. In notable contrast to the battles over the Motor Car Bill five years earlier, the moderate realists were – for the

* It was announced at the Club's annual dinner in March 1907 that the King, the Club's patron, wished the Club to be known henceforth as the *Royal Automobile Club*.

moment – predominant. As Joynson-Hicks said in introducing the deputation, motorists “were prepared to submit to any moderate increase in taxation if the Exchequer would devote it to road purposes”. A memorandum which he handed in went into more detail. The taxation of cars should be governed by several principles: it should be fair compared with taxation on other road-users; it should not be so heavy as to restrict the use of motor vehicles to the rich (“many members of the middle class are looking forward to being able to acquire and maintain motor cars, and additional taxation will act as an obstacle to this ambition”); motorists should not have to pay, as motorists, for their use of the roads, since most of them were already ratepayers, and some paid income tax. (This final point, for obvious reasons, was almost certainly a good deal less than the truth; to have admitted that most motorists were in the income-tax-paying bracket would have weakened the rival claim that motorists were ‘men of moderate means’.)

The proposals which followed from this general case were for a central fund, to be fed by the million pounds which the Exchequer already contributed to local authorities, plus the further million recommended by the Royal Commission on Local Taxation, all motor-car tax revenue, all revenue from other vehicles, and all fines and penalties levied under the Motor Car Act. The deputation explained that if motorists were to be taxed as road-users, horse-drawn vehicles should also be taxed, since they did as much damage. On the other hand, it should never come to this point: it would be hard to distinguish, for tax purposes, between the pleasure and the commercial user, and it would certainly be wrong to tax the commercial user.

At this point, according to the record, Asquith intervened. “I suppose”, he said of the commercial user, “he says he does not do as much damage to the road as you do.” Joynson-Hicks said that he had assumed that private cars were taxed as being luxuries. Asquith: “If you tax them as luxuries, there is no reason why the money should go to the roads.” Hicks agreed, but added that in any case it was wrong to tax them as luxuries simply because a few people used them as luxuries. This, in embryo, was the argument which has complicated discussions of motor taxation ever since. At the centre was the question of the justification for taxing motor vehicles at all: was it to pay for the damage they did, or simply because, like private carriages, or armorial bearings, they were such a self-sufficient

symbol of wealth that the motorist was by definition taxable? The very nature of a luxury tax, plus the fact that its proceeds would, according to established practice, go to the Exchequer, made it politically impossible to levy it at more than a very moderate rate; but a tax levied to pay for the damage to roads would have to be used for that purpose. This meant that it must be distributed by some central agency, since there was only one automatic criterion for direct distribution to the local authorities – the number of motor cars registered with each of them – which was of course precisely what the whole scheme was trying to get away from.

As Asquith pointed out a little later in the discussion, there was not much in this for the Treasury as such. "The Exchequer does not seem to profit on the transaction at all"; it would get merely the odium and expense of imposing and collecting the new tax and setting up a new department to supervise the roads.

The central decision had in fact been taken. A memorandum to Asquith from Customs and Excise in January 1908 began: "It is now proposed to alter and increase the rate of duty . . . for motors."⁷ But it still remained to decide how much of the increased revenue should go to the local authorities and what would be the most efficient machinery for distributing it. Asquith seems to have given the deputation the impression that a change was now imminent; later the same month, in a widely distributed circular to the electors, signed by Joynson-Hicks, the MU announced that motor taxation was likely to be increased in the coming Budget. It added that its policy was not to oppose any reasonable proposals, provided that the revenue went into a central fund and was used for road improvements and not for general rate relief. The Motor Union meanwhile continued to lobby the local authorities, Ministers and MPs.

The Budget saw no change in motor taxation; the subject was not even mentioned by government speakers in the debates. The RAC *Journal* expressed relief; the Prime Minister had evidently thought it best to let sleeping dogs lie, and to deal with taxation when he came to legislate in connection with the Motor Car Act.⁸ The MU continued to campaign.

It may have been the vigour of the MU campaign that decided the government, when they returned to the subject, to approach not the MU, but the RAC. In the autumn of 1908, Lloyd George, who was by now Chancellor, himself approached a group of MPs who were members of the RAC.⁹ He made it clear that the time had come to

increase motor taxation. But, provided that the increase raised enough revenue, he wanted to do what he could to help adapt roads to the needs of motor traffic. In this double task he sought the advice and help of the RAC. According to the Club's later account of these transactions, it took many meetings to convince Lloyd George of the RAC point of view. But he seemed finally satisfied that the direct taxation of motor vehicles could not raise more than the maximum recommended by the Royal Commission (and that the basis for this must be horsepower, not weight); that even this sum would not allow the creation of an effective central road authority; that since only the creation of such a road authority could justify *any* increase in taxation, a system of *indirect* taxation must be devised; and that of the various possible types of indirect tax, a tax on petrol was the least objectionable.

The main political problem still concerned the distribution of the money. Officials had in fact now been thinking about this for some time. The Customs memorandum of January 1908 suggested that most of the increased revenue should go to the local authorities. This, although seeming to be liberal, would be

a very good bargain for the Exchequer. The increased taxation of motors to the extent of £500,000 [the sum evidently contemplated], if imposed for the overt benefit of the Exchequer alone, will stimulate the already growing demands for Exchequer aid in restoring local roads damaged by motors licensed in other areas; and it may be doubted whether these local demands could be staved off for less than half the £500,000 of increased taxation on motors.¹⁰

This argument – that local demands for help with roads should be deflected away from the Treasury, or from other departments – seems to have been decisive. The final solution, as announced in Lloyd George's Budget speech in April 1909, was to make the roads system self-financing. There was to be a new graduated tax on cars based on their 'horsepower' (calculated by the RAC formula),* and a tax of 3d. a gallon on all imported oil (with a 50 per cent rebate for commercial vehicles). All the proceeds of the petrol tax (less the cost of collecting it) plus the proceeds of the new vehicle taxes (less a sum equivalent to the yield of the old taxes in 1909, which was to go direct to the local authorities) were to be spent on the roads. These funds – "from which . . . I, as Chancellor of the

* Details of the new scale are given on page 167 below.

Exchequer, shall derive no advantage" – were to be administered by a new "central authority", whose exact nature was not explained.¹¹

These proposals had been strongly opposed by officials in both Customs and the Treasury. Customs, who would have to administer the petrol tax, pointed out at length in a memorandum submitted to Lloyd George in March the many objections to a tax that fell on a product used for so many different purposes but defined by reference to only one of these – its use in motor vehicles – and which could so easily be evaded by motorists using petrol obtained tax-free for one of the other purposes. They added an objection to the whole principle of the scheme: "if it is desired to grant a sum of money out of the Exchequer for the improvement of roads, there is no special virtue in obtaining the money by means of a tax on Petrol used for Motors. The plan of ear-marking special taxes for special purposes is open to serious objection."¹²

This objection was couched in the decent language of an official memorandum. The informal protest sent by the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, Sir George Murray (who had given evidence to the Royal Commission), to his former chief, Asquith, was much blunter. He described the tax as one of "the largest blots on the Budget", and went on:

And why take all the trouble in a year of great stress to collect a new tax, not a $\frac{1}{2}$ d. of which is to find its way into the Exchequer?

Petrol is defined in the Budget as any liquid containing hydrocarbon which is calculated to propel a motor car with reasonable efficiency – or something like that. I have not got the exact words. You might as well define *wine* as any liquid containing alcohol, which if taken in unreasonable quantities is calculated to make a man intoxicated.¹³

In his Budget speech, Lloyd George introduced his motor taxation proposals in words which, elaborated by later Ministers, were to become – as they remained in the 1960s – one of the rallying cries of the motorists in their continuing struggles against the Treasury. Having announced that a central authority would be set up to administer roads finance, he added that, at least at the beginning, the brunt of the cost would have to be borne by the motorists. "They are willing and even anxious to subscribe handsomely to such a purpose, so long as a guarantee is given in the method and control of the expenditure that the funds so raised will not merely be devoted exclusively to the improvement of the roads, but that they

will be well and wisely spent for that end. . . ." He went on to give such a guarantee. " . . . I want to make it clear . . . that expenditure undertaken out of the fund must be directly referable to work done in connection with the exigencies of the motor traffic of the country . . . " (estimated at about £600,000 in that year).¹⁴

For the Conservative opposition, Austen Chamberlain made it plain that they would support the scheme only if it were tied exclusively to roads; they would oppose any taxation destined for the general revenue. Lloyd George repeated his assurances.

In the Finance Bill debates a month later, the spokesmen for the motorists in general accepted the principle of both parts of the new taxation.¹⁵ The RAC members, such as Rose and Norman, took a generally moderate line, and were doubtless flattered by Lloyd George's public thanks for their help. Behind the RAC's attitude was the view which Stanley and Norman put to the Club's general committee two days after this debate: that if the Chancellor was determined to tax cars, motorists could only accept this and do their best to influence the form the taxation would take. The committee – notably more moderate than it had been six years before – agreed, and unanimously resolved that the Parliamentary motorists had well represented the motoring interest.¹⁶

The Motor Union were less satisfied. Joynson-Hicks – who opened the day's debates on the horsepower tax – argued predictably that cars were not luxuries and should not be taxed as though they were. He added that the tax rose too steeply, and in its present form might well damage the industry. Summing up events later in the summer, Joynson-Hicks was at pains to make clear that neither he personally, nor the MU as a whole, was in any way responsible for Lloyd George's severe proposals (which, he lamented, everyone except the motorists thought the best feature of the Budget). During that year the Chancellor had acted "entirely in consultation with the RAC. It is perfectly true that he did consult myself, but I told him that I could not be taken in any way as assenting to his proposals".¹⁷

He went on to appeal for unity among motorists in the continuing struggle. This broke out again, with much greater intensity, over the question of how the tax revenue was to be administered and applied. In June the RAC general committee started to formulate their own proposals for submission to Lloyd George. Lloyd George refined his proposals for a 'central authority'; the Cabinet discussed the

question in July, and, as Asquith reported to the King, "the establishment of a central Road Board was approved, subject to the co-ordination of its work with that of the LGB, and to Treasury control".¹⁸

This proposal was embodied in the Development and Road Improvement Funds Bill, published late in August. The purpose of Part II of the Bill, which dealt with roads, was "improving the facilities for *motor* traffic in the UK" [my italics]. The new Road Board was to be constituted in accordance with Treasury regulations, and its members were to be appointed by the Treasury. It had powers not only to help local authorities, but itself to engage on major projects, including building new roads reserved for motor traffic. On such roads there was to be no speed limit.

If this was intended to secure the support of the motorists, it failed utterly. They were now very much on the defensive; moderation had become the new orthodoxy less from a recognition of the public interest than because even the most self-interested motorists now saw that more extreme tactics were unlikely to produce results. After the Budget the *Economist* had expressed the hope that nothing would be spent out of public funds to improve roads to enable cars to go faster (adding that any speed over 15 or 20 mph destroyed the roads and inconvenienced the public).¹⁹ Montagu was to comment a month or two later that anti-motoring feeling was still strong, especially in the House of Commons.²⁰

Determined not to risk all by demanding too much, the motorists gave an oddly qualified welcome to the Bill. At a long meeting in early September the RAC General Committee discussed the Bill.²¹ It was agreed that the Bill was in general satisfactory, and that motorists had better appear unanimous on this point lest their opponents take advantage of divisions among them to prevent its passage altogether. The chairman of the Roads Improvement Association suggested that even motorists would have found it hard to draft a Bill more in their own interests, but at the same time, it would be prudent not to ask for too much. This meant not even accepting all that they were offered. The ironic consequence of this approach was that the motorists themselves came out against the government's proposal, fifty years before the building of Britain's first motorway, to build roads without speed restrictions. Speakers at the General Committee meeting suggested that if such roads were built, increased motor taxation would have to be imposed to

pay for them, and that their existence would make it harder to relax existing restrictions, or to abolish the speed limit, on ordinary roads. This approach was epitomised in an article by Joynson-Hicks in the *MU Journal* the following month. Motorists, he wrote, did not want anything in the shape of special roads:

I am totally and entirely opposed to taking the motorist and placing him on the heights of fame with a special road to himself, or in the depths of infamy as a being who is not fit to be allowed on the ordinary roads of the country. . . . Once allow us to be put on separate roads and there will be an increasing outcry to keep us to those roads and to forbid us access to the ordinary roads of the country.

He concluded that motorists did not want roads without speed limits – a statement which may have been tactically sound, but which was patently untrue.²²

The wisdom of this conciliatory line was made plain when the debates on the Bill opened at the beginning of September. Lord Robert Cecil, opening the Second Reading debate for the Opposition, moved to reject the Bill altogether. It was a sectional measure benefiting only the motorist, and an unwarranted interference by central government with local authorities. Though it was time for the Exchequer to relieve local authorities of some of the financial burden of roads, this was not the way to do it; it merely created another agency to oppress them. In any case, the financial theory underlying the plan to tax motorists to pay for roads was quite unsound. It was impossible to 'divide' taxpayers into distinct classes and to tax one class without affecting any of the others. There was only one national tax fund, and every claim on it was a claim on national resources as a whole. The burden of taxation would in fact fall largely on the users of buses and goods vehicles; it would have to be recouped from lower dividends and increased fares, and would thus hit both the middle class and the working class, to the advantage of the very few who wanted to use motor roads. Cecil also objected to the Bill's land-acquisition proposals. Much of the later criticism of the Bill was to focus on these, as well as on the related powers given to the Road Board to build new roads. Bonar Law wound up for the Opposition with a powerful attack on the proposal to spend money on the new roads and on the creation of a new agency; the task should be given to the LGB.²³

During the Committee stage, the discussions of speed limits and of the role of the motor car took their course amid the larger arguments. Joynson-Hicks put forward the arguments he was to repeat in the *MU Journal*. Neither motorists nor the public wanted special motor roads; all roads should be open to all traffic. Rose hoped that no invidious distinctions would be drawn on any road between motorists and the public. For the Opposition, Morpeth argued that grants should be made out of the Fund not only for building new roads, but also for repairing existing ones where they had been damaged by motor traffic.

Lloyd George did not so much conciliate as capitulate to these objections. He went to lengths to emphasise that the powers to build new roads were only secondary; the first charge on the Fund would be for improvements. He accepted that if the Board did build any new roads, these should be open to traffic of all kinds. The whips were taken off for the vote on the speed limit on new roads; the provision that there should be no limit was defeated. The compulsory purchase provisions were modified. But he stood firm on his proposals for the Road Board.

Thus considerably altered and restricted in scope, the Bill went to the Lords. Here, against the government's insistent advice, an amendment was passed which had often been urged in the Commons: that the Road Board should be allowed to meet the costs of *maintaining* roads damaged by motor traffic. This was a simple subsidy to rural ratepayers – a long way from the Bill's original intention of creating a network of new and greatly improved roads suitable for their new users. The Lords also struck out the Board's power to acquire the land adjoining new road developments.²⁴

The Bill, as finally passed into law, was thus something much less than Lloyd George's original conception. Writing about it long after the event, Rees Jeffreys asserted that the whole scheme had been resisted by the large land-owners, who hoped themselves to profit from the increased land values resulting from the building of new roads; by the railways, fearing competition; and by the Treasury, who were hostile to the idea of ear-marking taxation for road-building and thus putting the revenue outside Treasury control.²⁵ But this comment ran together objections to different aspects of road-development made over a long period of time. There is no evidence that at this early stage, with the goods vehicle only feebly challenging the horse, even over short distances, the railways realised the threat

embodied in motor transport; the struggle between road and rail became marked only after 1918, and, in the event, was to be decisively won by road. The Treasury had indeed resisted the principle of the scheme; but even after the disappearance of the Road Board itself, Chancellors only gradually nerved themselves to take over the growing revenues of the Road Fund in the late 1920s. The opposition from land-owners may have been inspired by the wish to keep increments of land values for themselves, but must be seen – in 1909 above any other year – in the context of the general resistance of the Tory party and its landed supporters to the whole programme of taxation and social reform of which the Budget of 1909 was an essential part. What was striking about the Road Fund was not its failure, but – given the heretical principles upon which it was based – its survival: into the mid-1930s in practice, into the mid-1950s in form, and into the present day as a weapon of political argument.

The Road Board was duly constituted in May 1910. Its chairman, chosen by the Treasury, was Sir George Gibb, a former official of the North-Eastern Railway*; it had five other members, selected mainly on a territorial basis and its secretary was Rees Jeffreys.† (In 1913 it was to acquire, as ‘Chief Engineer’, the former county surveyor of Kent, H. P. Maybury.)‡

One almost immediate result of the creation of the Road Board was the virtual disappearance of ‘the motor problem’ as it had existed until then. Montagu, commenting in October 1909 on “the whittling down of the advantages given to motorists in what was once the Roads Improvement Bill”, and on the general silence or lack of success of the motoring spokesmen in the Commons debates, added that the lesson was “how dangerous it would be to ask for a new Motor Act to be introduced during the present Parliament . . .”. If the existing House of Commons were asked to interfere, motoring would receive a serious setback. Motorists should be thankful that pressure of more important business made it likely that Parliament would go on extending the 1903 Act for many years to come.²⁶

* Sir George Gibb (1850-1925). Solicitor. General Manager, NER, 1891-1906; Director, 1906-10. Chairman, Underground Electric Railways Co., 1906-10. Chairman, Road Board, 1910-19.

† His departure from the MU, of which he had been the driving force, made possible an amicable merger of the MU and the AA.

‡ Henry P. Maybury (1885-1943): Kent County Surveyor, 1903-13; Chief Engineer, Road Board, 1913-17; concerned with military transport in France, 1917-19; Director-General of Roads, Ministry of Transport, 1919-28; Consulting Engineer and Adviser to Minister of Transport, 1928-32. Knighted 1919.

It was a prophetic comment. The Act was to be renewed annually for the next thirteen years against the background of the belief that the motor problem had solved itself. So, in some senses, it had. Lloyd George had argued that although grants made under the Bill might incidentally relieve the rates, their main purpose was to cope with the difficulties of motor traffic, to lessen the perils of pedestrians and to deal with the dust nuisance. From a political viewpoint, the motor problem was composed of all these factors; the activities of the Road Board met them all – except possibly the perils of pedestrians – head-on. No new roads were ever built by the Board, and it sponsored few major improvements; much the largest part of its grants (over 90 per cent in all) went towards small-scale improvements in road surfaces. In short, tar replaced dust at the expense not of the ratepayers, but of the motorists. Local authorities were handsomely subsidised, without losing any of their independence to the Treasury, and without being obliged (as they were to be after the war) to incur the much heavier costs of new construction or major improvement. Their grievances subsided.

So too, from the same cause, did the grievances of rural pedestrians, fruit-growers and typewriter-users. Although in 1910, the chief constables told the Home Office that dust was still the chief occasion of complaints about motors,²⁷ by 1914 it and the dog-cart were on the way out together. Even allowing for the other pre-occupations of Cabinet and Parliament in the years after 1909, the disappearance of the motor car as a topic of political debate is striking. Parliamentary questions recurred on subjects such as the numbers of cars, the accidents caused by them,* the details of safety regulations, and the undoubted danger caused by motor buses in London. The anonymous writer(s) of the *Economist* continued to question the value of the motor car, asking in 1911: "Is the loss of comfort and convenience, and the positive annoyance suffered by the public, compensated for by the intensity of the pleasure obtained by a comparative handful of individuals?"²⁹ in 1912 reflecting that it was "amazing that in a civilised community... the pursuit of pleasure in our streets and high roads should be allowed to cause...

* These were growing rapidly. In 1909 motor vehicles were involved in 373 fatal accidents, in 1914 in 1,329. Horse-drawn vehicles caused twice as many deaths at the earlier date, three-quarters as many at the latter.²⁸ These figures were the more striking in that horse-drawn vehicles still made up most of the traffic (see p. 207).

this enormous loss of life, limb and property",³⁰ and in 1913 criticising the failure of the Select Committee on Motor Traffic to deal with the problem of motor-cabs and private motor cars: "The vehicles of the rich kill and maim far more people than the vehicles of the poor. . . . But then nearly all politicians and officials constantly drive at an excessive speed themselves."³¹ But there were no more of the large-scale Parliamentary debates that had been so common in the early 1900s.

The AA agreed with the *Economist* that the law was often broken, although they drew the opposite conclusions; asked by the Select Committee whether such behaviour was not "rather a bad example to set the lower orders", the AA spokesman replied that the fact that every motorist in the land, from the Prime Minister down, habitually broke the law was the chief ground for their argument that it was a bad law.³² Although the AA spent some time in 1912 drafting a Bill to amend the 1903 Act, and in 1914 could hope that it would soon be introduced,³³ the government showed no signs of interest. The answers given by Ministers to the rare questions about further legislation were often at best elaborately casual.* Thus Burns, in 1912, asked what powers he proposed to take to prevent motor accidents, replied simply: "I am disposed to think that the existing powers under the Act of 1903 are not inadequate."³⁶ In 1914 the Home Secretary, Reginald McKenna, told a questioner that the possibility of increasing penalties for drivers who failed to stop after accidents would "be sympathetically considered when legislation to amend the Motor Car Act is undertaken".³⁷

* Home Secretaries continued to be briefed to resist demands, from the trade unions in particular, for some kind of driving test. In 1911 Churchill, sticking closely to his brief, told a deputation from the TUC: "Few accidents arise . . . from ignorance of how to drive, and a much more frequent cause of disaster is undue proficiency leading to excessive adventure (*Great laughter*)".³⁴ McKenna was equally unyielding in 1912 and 1913, reinforced by the curious argument supplied by his officials that if the test were stiff enough to be effective "the would-be drivers would bring all sorts of pressure to bear (through their unions, and MPs, and kind-hearted individuals) for its relaxation", and by the more realistic but equally irrelevant one that the main motive for the TUC's request was not to prevent accidents, but to keep casual labour out of their trade.³⁵

4

AN ASSOCIATION OF BURGLARS

The Home Office and the AA

Most of the 50,000 private cars on the roads by mid-1909 were capable of travelling a good deal faster than the legal limit of 20 mph. (This was to be even more true where roads had been improved with the help of grants from the Road Improvement Fund.) Country police forces were thus offered for their attention a large number of minor criminals who were not only easily recognisable and could be apprehended without danger or much difficulty, but who also, in a society which still depended on the horse and saw no reason to love or admire the motor car, were rarely given the benefit of the doubt by local magistrates. For magistrates, in their other roles as councillors or as ratepayers, there was the additional inducement to severity that fines were paid direct into local funds,* and thus provided a useful supplement and relief to the rates. (One Bench was said to have imposed £1,000 of fines in a single week.)

This was not, of course, a new situation. Rural police forces had been netting and rural justices fining motorists on a large scale ever since the turn of the century; but with the improvement of both roads and cars, and the passage of time without any sign of government action, motorists found it increasingly hard to bear. Since 1905/6 the AA's (and later the Motor Union's) patrols had been an effective counter to police traps, especially as the police had found it difficult to devise legally water-tight ground to prevent the scouts coming between them and their legitimate prey. The Home Office, although responsible for the administration of the law, declined to intervene despite occasional questions about the AA in the House.¹ In August 1909, Mr Remnant asked if the Home Secretary had noticed the increase in the number of AA scouts in the past two years, and what he proposed to do to preserve the sole authority of the police. The Commissioner of Police commented that the scouts

* They were paid into the local Police Fund until the passage of the Roads Act in 1920.

had not increased in number, but that they undoubtedly hampered the police. In replying, the Home Secretary passed this on, and added that if "the evil" continued, Parliament might have to intervene to protect the police.²

The police did not find this attitude helpful. They wanted action. In September 1909, the Chief Constable of Sussex wrote in exasperation to the Home Office, complaining of the activities of the AA scouts:

They ride bicycles from place to place and are in many places controlled and directed by a superintending 'scout' who is furnished with a motor-cycle. They inform the police that they are employed and paid for the purpose of warning the drivers of cars to check their speed when approaching any point where police are engaged in timing cars over a measured distance.

He added that he had written, without effect, to the Secretary of the AA asking him to stop this practice.

Home Office officials, though generally sympathising with the police, were quite unable to suggest what might be done. The first minute on the file noted that the AA would doubtless deny the second statement. The Permanent Secretary, Sir Edward Troup,* commented, simply but unhelpfully; "What would they gain by denying what everyone knows to be true?" The Chief Constable was told that his statements would be borne in mind when the matter was considered further.

The Chief Constable was not satisfied with this. A few weeks later he wrote again, enclosing a copy of a letter which he had sent to the AA, complaining about a scout who had approached a motorist whom the police had succeeded in trapping, to tell him that the Arundel Bench would convict only on the evidence of two constables, and that there were no more traps this side of Arundel. This time the officials gave the matter rather more thought. The first minute took the same *non-possumus* line as before, commenting that there was nothing very serious in a scout's giving a motorist a piece of legal advice and a warning. But the second comment introduced an

* Sir Edward Troup (1857-1941). Joined Home Office 1880, Permanent Secretary 1908-22. Described by one of his former subordinates as "a rather silent, heavy Scot, with little sense of humour. He . . . was responsible for setting the standards and creating the machine which took the shock of the Liberal legislation of 1906-1914 and of the first World War" (Sir Harold Scott, *Your Obedient Servant*).

analogy which was to preoccupy the Home Office for as long as the scouts were a live issue. They should be suppressed; there was little difference in principle between their activities and those of a man who warns a burglar not to enter a house because he knows it to be under police observation. Troup seized on this: "It is more than this. It is like an association of burglars *employing* scouts to warn them which houses are and which are not watched by the police." But Troup could not suggest what might be done, and the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, was content to initial the file without comment.

The Chief Constable, thus left to his own devices, forwarded to the Home Office, a week later, a letter he had received from the Secretary of the AA, Stenson Cooke. Cooke was protesting about complaints made by his scouts that "certain of your officers consistently shadow them and adopt irritating and provocative attitudes, which can only tend to increase the tension that apparently exists". The Chief Constable asked if he could tell Cooke that the whole matter was being considered by the Home Secretary. The Home Office duly gave the matter further thought. At this point there is the first recorded intervention by F. Elliott,* a Home Office official who was himself an enthusiastic motorist; he was already a member of the 'Army Motor Reserve' and was to be a member of the AA Committee from 1934 until his death in 1939. Elliott, though relatively junior, was in the next few years consistently to present the motorists' case to his sceptical colleagues; his views, though usually considerably at odds with theirs, may well have influenced them in attempting to accommodate, rather than simply to suppress, the motor car. Having noted on the Chief Constable's last letter that "in Surrey there is a lot of mean persecution of the scouts by the police, and bad blood on both sides", Elliott then drafted a long memorandum suggesting that there was "at least a plausible case for the defence".

As an argument, it was a slightly disingenuous mixture. Elliott's first reason for not taking action against the AA was that their large membership now included the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice, both Law Officers, five members of the government (including a Secretary of State), the Leader and many other members

* F. L. D. Elliott (1874-1939): Home Office, 1898-1914; Assistant Commissioner of Police, 1914-31 (latterly in charge of Traffic Department, New Scotland Yard).

of the Opposition front bench, both archbishops, bishops and many county and borough chief constables. "Does not this fact alone", he suggested, "imply that we have to deal with something more than a mere selfish conspiracy of law-breakers?" Secondly, he argued, most police authorities now took no notice of mere infringements of the speed limit. The main exceptions to this were Surrey and East and West Sussex. Was it a coincidence that these were the three counties where, in the early days of cycling, cyclists had been most persecuted? Thirdly, the AA's basic aims were to protect their members against 'money-making' traps, and in areas without traps actually to help prosecute offenders. They had often been thanked for this service by citizens, local authorities and even by the police. He concluded by conceding that the AA had once been solely intent on frustrating police traps; at that stage they might reasonably have been suppressed. But now they "moved on a higher plane". They were on good terms with many police authorities, and any attempt at repressive legislation would be hotly resisted and must mean re-considering the speed limit.

Elliott's Assistant Under-Secretary, Byrne, agreed with some of this. Nonetheless, deliberate interference with the lawful action of the police should be treated as an offence. He suggested that a conference of chief constables should discuss the problem. The next minute on the file suggested that it was not for the AA "to arrogate to themselves the right to decide where the speed limit may be exceeded with safety to the public". Troup and Gladstone agreed with the proposal for a conference.

Before any action could be taken, the courts struck a further blow at the AA, to which the AA replied with yet another stratagem. The Divisional Court dismissed an appeal by the AA against a fine imposed (the case of *Betts v. Stevens*) on a scout for obstructing the Surrey police. Rufus Isaacs, for the AA, had argued that the scout was actually assisting the police by preventing an offence from being committed. But the Lord Chief Justice found that warning a car to slow down, so as to prevent the police getting the evidence necessary to prove an offence, did constitute obstruction.³ Home Office satisfaction at this was tempered by unease at the device put into effect by the AA, the same day as the court's decision, in an attempt to circumvent it. Aitken,* who as Principal Clerk was senior to Elliott

* "A charming, scholarly man, who had found time to become an authority on Addison, Steele and the literature of their period . . ." (Scott, *op. cit.*).

but junior to Byrne, attached to the file a copy of the notice issued by the AA to their members, which read in part:

It has been decided by the Committee that the services of the Patrols can be much more effectively rendered if Members will make a point of STOPPING TO INTERROGATE patrols whenever information or assistance is required. In pursuance of this plan cars will not in future be stopped by the patrols.

Aitken commented on the court decision:

This is satisfactory as far as it goes. But . . . it is intolerable that an agent of an association should follow the police from place to place, with the open intent of warning members, not that they must not commit the offence, but that they are to cease committing it at a particular spot, after which they may go on as before.

As preparation for the chief constables' conference, they were asked to send in copies of any general instructions which they had issued about the treatment of motoring offences.

Elliott summarised these instructions, marking them where he thought them 'flagrantly misleading'; thus Cornwall, which replied that it directed special attention to the dangerous driving provision and set traps only at dangerous places, was annotated: "Notorious for unreasonable traps, e.g. on open moorland roads." Such exceptions apart, county and borough forces fell more or less equally into the categories "Common sense and instructions" and "No special instructions". Byrne commented that 'objectionable trapping' seemed to be almost universally disclaimed and was not in fact widespread. Gladstone noted: "It is quite time that police action should be put on a uniform and national basis."

The motoring organisations would strongly have agreed. They were now trying to persuade Parliamentary candidates, as well as voters, that a change in the law was needed. Thus the Berkshire Automobile Club had decided to put four questions to all candidates for constituencies in and around the county: When a new motor-car Bill was introduced, would they vote for increasing the speed limit in open country to at least 30 mph? Would they support a clause providing that licences should be endorsed only for serious offences? Did they agree that there should be only nominal penalties for technical offences? Would they promote or back a Bill requiring all vehicles to carry a lamp showing red behind (a provision aimed at the unlighted farm vehicle - see chapter 11).⁴

The tactics of the AA were different. In January 1910 they disclaimed any intention of trying to influence their members' decisions on whether or not to lend their cars to Parliamentary candidates, but they would try to find out what the voters thought, and to this end proposed to distribute a questionnaire to those riding to the polls in borrowed cars. A specimen of this read:

To the Voters

Have you enjoyed this ride?

Do you know that in spite of the care and consideration with which the car has been driven, the driver may be summoned and fined, possibly for an alleged excess of the speed limit, or a trifling infraction of one or other section of the Motor Car Acts, quite irrespective of danger or inconvenience to the public?

Is it not unfair?

If you agree, kindly sign this card, which will be duly returned to the AA. . . .⁵

But there had been no change in the basic situation by the time the chief constables met in London in April 1910. This conference was not in itself of much help to Home Office officials. There was general agreement on several points. Magistrates were convicting in a higher proportion of prosecutions than before; in Northumberland the percentages for 1906, 1908 and 1909 were 51, 79 and 83 respectively. This did not always hold; prosecutions under Section 1 were not always successful, since magistrates had no option but to endorse a licence, which – especially with hired drivers whose livelihood depended on a clean licence – they were reluctant to do. On the other hand, it was not at all certain that the penalties inflicted by magistrates were effective. It was generally felt that these were now much less severe than they had been. Moreover, fines did not deter wealthy owners or their chauffeurs, whose employers simply paid the fine for them. (It was noted that there were far more owner-drivers than before – perhaps half of the total.) The main problem was still dust, the chief subject of complaints to the police.⁶

It was still not clear what should be done. The Home Office was not eager to introduce new legislation. Sir Edward Henry, at the chief constables' conference, said bluntly that "as so many people held different views upon motoring matters, he did not think much

was to be expected in the way of legislation" – an accurate forecast.

It was tentatively agreed that the Home Office might try to guide magistrates towards more uniform administration of the law.

There was much truth in Henry's point. Six months later, nothing had been done, even about the guidance for magistrates, and Remnant was again asking about AA scouts. He asked the Home Secretary if he would "now issue instructions that the complete control of our main roads is handed over to the police forces of this country, unhampered by the scouts of the AA". Elliott was instructed to provide an answer for the Home Secretary, now Winston Churchill. Conciliatory as ever, he suggested that there had recently been fewer complaints about the scouts in the press and elsewhere; he had himself been told by Stenson Cooke that many of the scouts were posted at places to check rash driving and to protect the public, by arrangement with various chief constables (some of whom, Elliott added, were themselves members of the AA). To ensure that the political difficulties implicit in this final comment were quite clear, Elliott added, without comment, as his final point: "The AA has just absorbed the Motor Union and so will become a more powerful body than ever."

Henry, asked for his views, took a rather different line. Although AA scouts had not troubled the police, they might become active again at any time. "They exist for the purpose of facilitating the breaking of the law that controls speed and so far from bringing about more careful driving do much to promote over-fast driving."

Elliott clearly found this tactless. It would be a pity, he noted against Henry's comments, if the Secretary of State identified himself with these views, which were not shared by a great number of chief constables, many of whom were indeed biased in favour of the AA. And returning to his favourite reason for discretion, he added that the AA now included at least another seven members of the government, as to his knowledge another Secretary of State and Mr Lloyd George had joined.

Churchill accepted the conclusions, if not the reasoning, without comment. He told Remnant that the scouts had not given much trouble in London, and that he had had no complaints recently from elsewhere, and that in any case he had no power to issue the kind of instructions that Remnant wanted.⁷

This still left open the question of whether anything should be done to enforce uniform standards of action against motoring

offenders. A week or two later Elliott, cautious as ever, minuted Aitken:

The present does not seem to be a very suitable time to propose any legislation on the subject, partly on account of the Parliamentary situation, and partly because the complaints against the AA seem to be dying down. . . . Also such legislation can hardly fail to raise the whole question of the speed limit and motor car law.

He asked whether, instead, a start should be made on drafting the circular to police and magistrates. Aitken thought the circular should go ahead. Byrne disagreed: "Most benches are wedded to their own ways of dealing with motorists, and in matters so arguable, it is doubtful whether they would be moved."

He suggested that the whole plan should be shelved. But Troup thought that work should continue on the circular, and Churchill agreed.

A draft of the circular was sent in December 1910 for comments to "one or two friendly chief constables" and to the Chief Magistrate. It pointed out that the Home Secretary's attention was from time to time drawn to "what is alleged to be the unequal manner in which the motor car acts are administered. . . . Serious offences are punished too lightly and minor offences with disproportionate severity. . . ." The ample powers of fining, disqualifying or imprisonment should be quite adequate to stamp out the more serious offences; but they should exercise great discretion when dealing with the class of offences which could be either serious or trivial, depending on the circumstances. Heavy penalties for trivial offences were "calculated to create a sense of injustice in the individual without any corresponding advantage to the community"; and they must bear some relation to the offender's means.

The Chief Magistrate and the two chief constables agreed that the circular could usefully be sent to justices. But the Home Office and its Minister had other preoccupations during the spring and summer of 1911, and in October Elliott was still trying to persuade Aitken that there was a case for issuing the circular. He had himself seen, in draft, a memorandum being prepared for submission to Churchill from a Hampshire Bench, complaining that the local police insisted on bringing an enormous list (80 per day, or more) of charges against motorists for trivial offences; for instance, numbers on plates being fractionally smaller or larger than allowed by the

regulations – “points more worthy of a German bureaucrat than of English constabulary”. Although the magistrates usually dismissed such cases, the police continued to bring them.

Churchill was not moved. But the problem remained. In May 1912 the persistent Remnant put down yet another Parliamentary question about AA scouts. On what authority, he asked, were they allowed to use the roads “for the purpose of interfering with the police and preventing them from carrying out the law with regard to motor traffic and so safeguarding the lives and liberties of the poor members of our population”? Henry explained that the AA had recently appointed six scouts for the Metropolitan area, and had undertaken that they would not interfere with the police. To Elliott, the situation was much the same as it had always been. He commented:

The AA is an anomaly, which came into existence, and continues to flourish, largely through an anomalous state of things, viz: the rigid – and in many cases very harsh – administration of the letter of motor car law without any exercise of the discretion usually shown by police and magistrates in other matters. . . . As most of the prominent members of the government and the opposition are members of the AA it is probably undesirable to give the hostile answer which Mr Remnant would like.

The Home Secretary, Reginald McKenna, accepted this argument without comment and gave a neutral answer.⁸

In October McKenna, without explanation, asked to see the text of the draft circular. Two weeks later it was circulated, over Troup’s signature, to all magistrates and – with a separate covering letter recommending the setting of police traps only in places where high speeds would be dangerous – to all chief constables.

This was not quite the end of the matter. The circular provoked a Parliamentary question asking whether there was any precedent in the Home Office for advising magistrates in what manner and to what extent they should punish offenders. There were indeed precedents, collected together in a Blue Book some years before; as McKenna blandly pointed out in his answer: “It has always been regarded as one of the duties of the Home Secretary to give general advice and guidance to magistrates in the administration of the law.”⁹

However, this was not to be the last discussion of the activities of AA scouts, and it was only the beginning of official and public

concern about the behaviour of the bench towards motoring offenders. Six months later the Chief Constable of Manchester told the Select Committee on Motor Traffic that although he had personally seen to it that every magistrate in his area received a copy of the circular, it had produced little improvement. "Of course there is a distinct tendency today in the direction of leniency. . . ." ¹⁰ The Select Committee itself concluded, later in the same year: "It is against public policy that the administration of laws and regulations which are intended to secure safety should be uncertain and too little deterrent." ¹¹

What was new here was the emphasis on leniency. In the past, the courts had of course been criticised mainly for their severity towards motorists; but even at the time when the Home Office circular was being drafted, three years before, the police had felt that the courts were starting to impose lighter penalties. Now a disinterested third party had agreed that penalties were sometimes too light. The complaint was to be heard all too often in the years ahead.

5

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The 1914-18 war

By the end of 1914 there were nearly 140,000 motor cars on British roads, about the same number of motor cycles, and nearly 400,000 motor vehicles altogether. The membership of the combined AA and Motor Union was approaching 100,000. The RAC had 8,000 full members and many more 'associates'. Motoring was still not an activity for the masses or for the man of moderate means. But things were changing. Although as late as 1920 Lord Russell could appeal to the Ministry of Transport not to deface with licences and so on "what, after all, in many cases are private carriages",¹ the Chief Constable of Birmingham in 1913 saw the spread of motoring as a reason for not relaxing restrictions: "Having put on a 20-mile limit by Act of Parliament, if you repealed it now your lower class motorist will think he can go how he likes."²

The 1913 Motor Show was attended by 156,000 people, twice the attendance of five years before.³ At the lower end of the range a few car prices foreshadowed the long descent which was to continue until 1939. At the 1912 Motor Show Ford had exhibited their Model T priced at £133 complete and ready for the road, and William Morris's first car, produced in 1913, was the £165 Oxford. But these prices were the exception. Very few cars were offered for sale in 1913 at less than £200: the Morris Cowley 11-9 was £200 new, the Standard 14, £385. The Morris Cowley was the nearest British equivalent to the Ford, and the relative prices of the two cars reflected the very different conditions in the British and American industries. In 1913 British firms produced about 35,000 motor vehicles of all types: American production at this time was running at nearly half a million a year. Of the British total, Ford alone accounted for a quarter; the remainder was spread among over a hundred firms (300 more had failed since the 1890s). The better products of this fragmented cottage industry were inevitably expensive. But, made to high standards, they were at least competitive

with their foreign counterparts. It was at the lower end of the scale that the British industry drove itself into a cul-de-sac – turning out, as a leading historian of the industry has commented, “a cheap, under-sized, underpowered vehicle which was to have no future at all”.⁴

There had been great improvements in the roads. By the spring of 1915 £2½ million worth of improvements authorised by the Road Board had been carried out. Most of this money had been spent on road surfaces; in the simplest terms, this meant tarring or macadamising, and a consequent end to the dust nuisance. But the position and working of the Road Board became more unsatisfactory as the years passed. It failed to satisfy the demands of any of the major parties for whose benefit it had been created. This was at least partly due to the slowness with which the Board worked; by the end of its first year of operation the Board, having made grants worth only just over a quarter of a million, had accumulated assets worth nearly two million. By March 1915, against the £2½ million of work actually carried out, the Board's total revenue had come to nearly £6½ million.⁵ Observing this hoarding by the Board, local authorities protested strongly that they were still not receiving enough help to deal with the increasing expense caused by motor traffic; the rural districts complained, for instance, that the Board gave grants only for main roads – for the benefit of scorching motorists – while the commercially vital side-roads were neglected. The urban districts found themselves overwhelmed by the motor bus. By 1912, many local authorities were petitioning the Treasury to allow at least some of the revenue from motor taxation to be paid direct to them.⁶

At the same time the motorists, though glad to see an end to dust, were disturbed at the Board's policy of financing the patching up of old roads rather than rebuilding and re-aligning them to suit them for motor traffic. The Board thus relieved highway authorities of much of the expense that had previously been theirs, and so in practice did subsidise the rates in precisely the way motorists had originally insisted it should not. It can have been little comfort to the Board that these criticisms were countered by those of, for instance, the *Economist*, which continued to argue that the Board was simply an instrument of the motorists, working to suit the roads to their needs alone.

The Board worked extremely unsystematically. Throughout the whole of its life it met only 41 times – an average of five times a year

— even counting for this purpose meetings attended only by the chairman, Gibb, who often made decisions on grants without consulting his colleagues.⁷ Maybury recalled later that at most meetings the Board's only business was to hear the chairman's report on what he had done: "It was very rarely that we had more than two members present, other than the chairman, and I have known meetings to be convened for 3 o'clock in the afternoon and to be over in five or six minutes."⁸ Personal relations within the Board seem never to have been good, and by the end of its life had made normal business impossible. Rees Jeffreys explained the Board's defects largely by reference to its chairman's railway bias and the total ignorance of most of its members of roads and local government. Gibb, doubtless aware of Jeffreys' hostility, administered to him in 1914 a savage rebuke on the way he carried out his duties.⁹ When in the same year the Macdonnell Commission on the Civil Service came to look at the Road Board, they expressed amazement and dismay at the way it worked. They were extremely critical both of Gibb's indiscriminate personal largesse and of Jeffreys' methods of recording the Board's business. It was hardly surprising that they concluded that the administration of the Board's finances was "less subject to Parliamentary criticism than that of any other Department which has come under our review", and recommended that its functions should be brought under a clearly responsible Minister.¹⁰

This last point, as Rees Jeffreys was much later to emphasise in a one-sided but valuable discussion in *The King's Highway*, was crucial. The Board might possibly have survived both its faulty management and its many critics had it not been for its anomalous constitutional position. Deliberately insulated from Treasury control and from political pressures, it was free to justify its activities in public as much or as little as it liked. There was no way of bringing the growing body of criticism to bear. In the Commons debates (which occurred on average at least once a year) the Board's point of view was represented either by one of its MP members who would offer some informal explanations on a purely personal basis, or by a Treasury Minister who invariably insisted that he was in no way responsible for what the Board did or left undone. Criticised by MPs, by the Treasury, by the motorists, by local authorities, and torn by internal dissension, the Board was already in a very weak position by 1914.

The war finished it off. What proved in the long run to be its death-blow was suspension of payments out of the Fund by the

Finance Act, 1915; this banished the Board to a financial limbo from which it never fully returned.

The war also affected the private car. The government never nerved themselves, as after some hesitation was done in the next war, to stop private motoring altogether by petrol rationing. The car slowly came to be regarded as a luxury whose use could not be justified under wartime conditions, but the only check on its use was that applied by public opinion. This was not wholly effective, perhaps because of the government's failure to give a firm lead at the beginning; until well into the war, Napier advertisements continued to be embellished with photographs and testimonials from Cabinet Ministers. On the other hand, when in the autumn of 1915 the Coalition government, with the Liberal McKenna at the Treasury, did take the step of proposing a $33\frac{1}{3}$ per cent duty on imported cars, they tried to salve their free-trading consciences by going to some lengths to show that this move had no protective aim, but was intended simply to save shipping space.¹¹ McKenna argued that the British industry had ceased production.* The purpose of the duty was simply to limit imports of an article "which is extensively used solely for the purpose of luxury". Despite objections, the proposal was carried; and so, amid protests, denials and promises of early review, was erected the tariff wall which, marginally lowered, still protects the British motor industry.

The private car slowly came to be regarded as a symbol of unpatriotic luxury, its use an activity calling for some kind of explanation. The Northcliffe press was particularly critical of the continued use of cars (leading Stenson Cooke at one stage to cancel the AA's subscription to all the Northcliffe papers).¹³ When in 1916 the National Organising Committee for War Savings singled out private motoring as a "form of selfish or thoughtless extravagance", the *Daily Mail* demanded that motoring be prohibited by law.¹⁴ (The *Autocar* commented that this "mischievous document... places every private user under suspicion of being an 'unpatriotic joy-rider'".) The protests about the use of cars to attend race-meetings grew louder. The government had accepted the argument of the race-horse interests that some racing was necessary as part of the bloodstock breeding programme, which in turn was essential if

* This was nearly true. Napier, to take one example, had intended to produce 550 cars in 1914. In fact they turned out 350; between 1915 and 1917 200 in all; and in 1918 none.¹²

Britain was to continue to have enough horses for defence purposes. They had also asked race-goers not to use the railways, since this interfered with troop movements. The race-course owners, in what they presented as a patriotic attempt to discourage unnecessary spectators, sharply raised admission charges. The combined effect of these moves was the spectacle of racing becoming a privilege of the rich and the motorists, apparently with the government's blessing. An appeal by Runciman in the spring of 1915 that all meetings except Newmarket should be suspended was ignored by the Jockey Club.¹⁵

The 1916 Budget proposals included doubling the licence duty on all cars up to 16 horsepower and tripling it on all others. McKenna was sure, he said, "that nobody will object to this".¹⁶ Few did. When the AA and MU protested to McKenna, the *Evening Standard* commented in a leading article: "The motorist on the whole stands for a class of the community who may well be termed 'well-to-do', and it is one of the privileges of this class to pay very heavily in the case of a national crisis."¹⁷ But there was still scope for MPs to argue hotly, if inconclusively, about whether or not cars could justly be considered luxuries. The old spectre of the motor car as a factor in the class war was raised again; a Conservative back-bencher protested that although this tax increase would be much welcomed by "the populace", it represented a "pandering . . . to an unhealthy instinct".¹⁸

This was to be one of the very few occasions when criticisms of motor taxation were effective. A few weeks later the government withdrew the proposals,¹⁹ explaining that it had become clear that increasing the licence duty would not be an equitable way of deterring the unnecessary use of motor cars. "A large number of people", explained the Financial Secretary, Edwin Montagu, "many, many years ago, purchased small cars which they use in the pursuit of their ordinary avocation, and on which they would have suddenly to pay a prohibitive licence duty." The government therefore proposed to restrict petrol supplies, and to double the petrol tax to 6d. per gallon. Montagu described this as "a supertax on motor cars for the war and for the war only". The 50 per cent rebate on petrol tax already available to commercial vehicles was extended to doctors and vets, despite McKenna's argument that both doctors and vets were entirely free to choose between the motor car and the horse.

These proposals were accepted, on behalf of the motorists, by

Joynson-Hicks, who claimed that in any case pleasure motoring had given way almost entirely to voluntary work done for the war effort. Other MPs unkindly pointed out that it was still possible to see large numbers of cars in places, such as race-courses, which could claim little connection with the war effort, and welcomed the tax as being likely to end this kind of unpatriotic behaviour. This attack on motorists drove Joynson-Hicks in turn to criticise the tax. If its object really was to stop people going to the races in cars, it was misconceived. Many of the cars to be seen at race-tracks were hired for the day, not driven by 'ordinary motorists' (the familiar notion of the motorist as a property-owning gentleman): and the way to end this nuisance was surely to ban not motoring, but racing.²⁰ Soon after the Jockey Club agreed to suspend all race meetings after August.

The government's attitude towards motoring was in general irresolute. They made it clear that they disapproved of the extravagant use of cars, but were not prepared to enforce their disapproval. In January 1918 an Order was issued defining the purposes for which petrol might lawfully be used in cars; these included the fetching of fuel, stores, medical and surgical requisites; visiting doctors, dentists, legal advisers, professional agents or banks; taking children to school, performing any public duty (including appearing at a court of law).²¹ On the other hand, where public thinking placed the motor car in the scale of extravagances is neatly illustrated by the 1918 report of the Select Committee on Luxury Duty. Asked to consider which articles might be subjected to a luxury duty, the committee took this as covering any expenditure "as may fairly be called unnecessary or superfluous". In many cases superfluity was indicated by high prices, but the committee drew up one list of goods which they felt should be subject to the duty no matter what they cost. The list itself is a kind of catalogue to early twentieth-century high life; in it, despite the urgent representations of the motor manufacturers that "the private motor car will henceforth be used almost entirely for business purposes and for expediting the work of professional and commercial men", was included the motor car, along with precious stones, feather boas, fans, perfumes, yachts and pleasure boats, autograph letters, billiard tables and cocktails.²² *

* The manufacturers were spared this burden by the ending of the war; the Chancellor announced in 1919 that the luxury taxes would not be imposed. They

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Given the ineffectiveness of public opinion and official action, it is not surprising that the war failed to drive the motor car off the roads. Between the spring of 1914 and that of 1916 total registrations actually increased by about 7 per cent; and even two years later, after three and a half years of war, well over half the cars registered in 1914 were still running. It was this resilience of motoring, and the prospect of its rapid growth after the war, added to the deterioration of the roads, which made so urgent the question which from about 1916 overshadowed all other arguments about motors and roads: the future of the Road Board, and of the Fund which it administered. In 1915 the Committee on Retrenchment in the Public Expenditure, recommending that the Exchequer should borrow the whole of the three million surplus in the Road Improvement Fund, commented: "It is not clear to us that there is any necessity for continuing the Road Board in future as a separate Government Department, and in our opinion it should be carefully considered whether the Board's duties could not be transferred to the LGB after the war."²³

The motorists started lobbying well before the end of the war. Rees Jeffreys, who was still formally secretary of the Road Board (although with virtually nothing to do), wrote to an official in the Ministry of Reconstruction in December 1917, offering his services as one who had been "studying the problems of inland transport for the past twenty-five years".²⁴ A month later the RIA (of which also Jeffreys was still secretary) submitted a memorandum on post-war roads policy, prepared, according to Jeffreys, at the suggestion of the SMMT. The Royal Scottish Automobile Club wrote to the Minister of Reconstruction, Addison, the same week, asking that the funds lost to the Road Board during the war should be restored and suggesting a general scheme of road-building and improvements.²⁵

Jeffreys himself was leading a vigorous campaign to ensure that the Road Board, in suspense since 1915, was not allowed to fade away after the war. He was in constant touch with Maybury (now serving with the army transportation staff in France) and later with Montagu (who was in India as Inspector of Motor Vehicles). In the summer of 1918 he told Maybury that Gibb, the Board's chairman,

were to be equally lucky in their request that the McKenna duties should be continued at least until the end of 1920. Although the Board of Trade formally rejected the suggestion, nothing was to be done about removing the duties before the first downward turn of the economy ruled out such a drastic step.

was "out to get the Board broken up when he has done with it. He told me he was of opinion it should go under the LGB." Maybury offered to do what he could to prevent this, and suggested that the main task was to get rid of Gibb. He wrote: "I am all out to help you. *Direct me.*" But direction from London could achieve little; and although Montagu suggested that Maybury should come over to England to discuss the Board's future, Maybury thought this would be fruitless.²⁶

In fact by this stage the battle for the Board—which was to rage in public for another year—was probably in private irretrievably lost. Roads, as a major administrative responsibility of local government, had never been likely to be overlooked by the sharp eye of Beatrice Webb, a member of the Reconstruction Committee. As early as April 1917 she had circulated a memorandum to the Committee proposing that a small expert sub-committee be set up to consider

- (1) which government department should be responsible for securing the 'national minimum' of efficiency in road administration;
- (2) how to adjust the conflicting interests of local authorities, and thus secure unified local administration;
- (3) the future of the Road Board.²⁷

The belief that drastic changes were necessary can only have been reinforced by Gibb's evidence to the committee. He declared that the highway authorities would not provide the capital needed for rebuilding the more important roads unless they were either compelled to do so by law or given a great deal of help by the Exchequer. Either of these alternatives implied a major change in established relationships between local authorities and central government.²⁸

The Reconstruction Committee seems at one stage to have considered putting the Road Board in its existing form, together with other local government functions, under a new Ministry of Health and Local Government; but by fairly early in 1918 the arrangement most often mentioned in the Committee's surviving papers is broadly what the government finally proposed: a department of Communications and Transport, with responsibility for all aspects of transport policy, including those dealt with by the Road Board.²⁹

How permanent officials saw the main problems in the roads field is shown by a paper drawn up in the Ministry of Reconstruction

early in 1918. The immediate need was to get the roads back to their pre-war standard; the first question was whether the Road Board would be competent to handle a major crash programme. The long-term questions were whether the state should take over responsibility for roads, and how far vehicle taxation should be related to road use. Existing arrangements had often been agreed to be unsatisfactory, but nothing had been done about them; the whole position of the Road Board would have to be reconsidered. There were many other problems: producing a new scale of vehicle taxation, reviewing the petrol tax, preparing regulations for motor vehicles of all kinds. Also:

How is the automobile industry to be restarted in this country after its diversion to the manufacture of munitions and aeroplane engines? What protection is to be given to British manufacturers against American competition so as not to increase the cost of ownership and repairs to the consumer?³⁰

It was a perceptive catalogue.

In the autumn of 1918 Rees Jeffreys, in the name of the Road Board, submitted to a Cabinet committee what were in fact his own proposals for the post-war roads programme; he envisaged a five- to ten-year programme whose first year alone would cost £30 million. The Treasury later divided this figure by two and a half.³¹ Nonetheless, given the pressure on resources after four years of war, this was an encouraging start to the roads interests' campaign – made all the easier by having Jeffreys, one of the key figures in the interlocking complex of pressure groups, virtually inside the government machine through his position at the Road Board.*

But the struggle for finance was only one prong of the motorists' campaign. The other consisted in the struggle for control over the way the money was to be spent. This meant preserving the Road Board, while getting rid of Gibb. In October 1918 Joynson-Hicks, in his capacity as chairman of the AA and vice-president of Jeffreys' RIA, opened the attack with a letter to Lloyd George. He argued that the roads were in a worse state than they had been for fifty years; that large sums would have to be spent on them; and that the Road Board had the confidence of the local authorities and, he

* The final outcome was that the Treasury agreed to provide £8½ million out of the Exchequer for grants-in-aid to local authorities to repair the ravages of wartime.

thought, of the road-users. But, he went on, if the Board were to carry out new schemes, it must have a new chairman and better members. Joynson-Hicks' letter was circulated, without comment, to the War Cabinet.³² It does not appear ever to have been discussed.

This lack of ministerial interest in Joynson-Hicks' proposals was symptomatic of the almost total failure of this part of the motorists' campaign. The struggle intensified as it became obvious, towards the end of 1918, that the government – who decisively won the General Election in December – were thinking of creating a single department to be responsible for all forms of transport, thus lumping together roads and railways. The motorists agreed in opposing this, but could not bring themselves to cooperate.³³ The AA and the RAC were kept apart by a now traditional hostility. In January 1919 the AA joined forces with the SMMT (once closely linked with the RAC) to form a new joint organisation to be known as the Motor Legislation Committee. Its tasks were to press the government to remove wartime restrictions on the use of motor vehicles; to restore and strengthen roads and bridges; to make available enough motor-fuel at reasonable prices. The chairman of the MLC was to be Joynson-Hicks, with Rees Jeffreys (who was still secretary of the RIA) as vice-chairman. A strong 'Parliamentary committee' was formed at once and soon started a vigorous publicity campaign against the proposed department.³⁴ A little later, the RIA tried to increase its membership by allowing commercial users to join.³⁵ At the same time as the formation of the MLC, the RAC announced that it, too, had formed its own separate Parliamentary committee. January 1919 saw the first meeting of the British Motor League, which had been founded the previous autumn "in the sole interests of motorists and not for creating highly paid positions". Its motto was 'Motoring for the Million'.³⁶

The Ministry of Communications (or Transport) came much nearer reality when after the election the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, appointed Sir Eric Geddes* as its Minister-to-be. Geddes, like Gibb, had worked before the war on the North-Eastern Railway. He had offered his services to Lloyd George at the Ministry of Munitions in 1915, had later been sent by him to France to organise military transport (with the rank of honorary Major-General), and

* Sir Eric Geddes (1875-1937). Later chairman of the committee on National Expenditure 1921-2; chairman, Dunlop Rubber Co.; chairman, Imperial Airways.

in 1917 had been appointed First Lord of the Admiralty (with the rank of honorary Vice-Admiral). Lloyd George later called him "one of the most remarkable men which the state called to its aid . . .".³⁷ He was offered the chance to stay on at the Admiralty, but chose instead to go to Transport – appropriately enough for a man who had once said: "Transport is my religion." He saw his main task there – as the motorists had feared – to be the reorganisation of the railways.³⁸

There was little chance that the energetic and dedicated Geddes could be deflected from his purposes by the lobbying of the motorists. They did their best. Most of the running was made by the MLC and by the RAC, working through its Parliamentary committee. They acted on several fronts at once. In January 1919, Montagu had a protracted correspondence with Geddes about his plans for the Road Board or its replacement. Geddes had not yet put his proposals to his Cabinet colleagues, and repeatedly turned aside Montagu's enquiries with the insistence that he knew nothing about an intended Ministry of Transport. At about the same time, Maybury's earlier suggestions having produced no results, Rees Jeffreys wrote direct to the joint permanent secretary at the Treasury, proposing himself as a member of the Road Board; three members of the Board wrote to Austen Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with the same suggestion. Jeffreys wrote to Gibb about "the great anxiety among the motor and road organisations as to the possible absorption of the Road Board in the proposed Department of Ways and Communications", and asking for a full and frank discussion with Gibb. Gibb replied simply that this was not a convenient moment: "I must reserve my views for official consumption."³⁹

None of the other approaches was any more successful. Chamberlain told Montagu that there were "very serious objections" to appointing Rees Jeffreys to the Board, and refused to see a deputation from the AA or from the RAC's Parliamentary Committee; he suggested that they should approach the Prime Minister. The motorists had to content themselves with continuing to perfect their organisation; the MLC was hailed by the *Autocar* as promising a new era in motoring's relations with government: "In the past motorists have been regarded with contempt by the Government, chiefly because of the sorry figure they have cut in Parliament." Joynton-Hicks, as its chairman, wrote to the LGB, protesting

against putting roads under the same department as railways and canals; he proposed a separate Department of Roads, with its own Minister.⁴⁰ The Federation of British Industries wrote to the LGB, protesting that it was "strongly opposed to roads and road traffic being rendered subject to the influence of railway men, and it would view with grave concern any proposal under which the control of the roads and road traffic would be directed by the department charged also with the management of the railways".⁴¹

Montagu (still in India) agreed with this analysis. He told Rees Jeffreys that he regretted not being at home "to help you fight the attack of the railway ring on our roads". He suggested that the railway interests were anxious to form a general transport Ministry because they were convinced that railways were bound to become less important; he recalled that both Gibb and Geddes had been associated with the merger between the LGOC and the Tube railways which had resulted in channelling the profits from the buses into subsidising the ailing Tubes - "so we have got to keep our eyes skinned". He agreed that the Road Board should be enlarged by adding representatives of bodies such as the CMUA and the SMMT; "but I say frankly that I should like to be chairman, even if unpaid, for my heart is very much in the road and all that concerns it".⁴²

But little came of all this activity. A leading article in *The Times* agreed that road transport was "bound up with the future prosperity of the country". But the article went on to point out, very fairly, that before the war road-users had continually complained about the very system they now apparently wanted to see reinstated, and concluded that it was precisely because the control of road transport was so important that it should not be allowed to become a field for sectional controversy.⁴³

This was close to the official view. In the light of the later years of economic and administrative retrenchment and the retreat from government it is striking how far members of this government were prepared, for a time, to argue in terms of the positive and creative role of the executive. In February 1919 Geddes put to the Cabinet the case for a Ministry of Ways and Communications in terms which were not to be realised in practice until after another world war had still further affected views about the proper place of government:

One of the changes brought about in our national life by the war is the altered conception of the duties of government. The events of

the past four years have shown that a national emergency demands more from government departments than the regulatory and restricted functions which have hitherto been the main feature of their activities. . . .

The war against Germany is over: the war against obsolete and inefficient industrial and social conditions is just commencing.

The country now expects from the government, not only regulation and restriction, but initiation and inspiration – a positive, not merely a negative policy. . . . Among the matters to be dealt with on new lines, transportation holds a prominent place, and the hopes raised will have to be satisfied. . . .

Transport policy in the past had been purely negative, and a good example of this had been the government's attitude to 'motors':

The instinct of the government then was to safeguard the public against new elements of danger. And it took appropriate action. That was a purely negative policy. A positive policy would have welcomed the appearance of a new transportation agent, and adopted the most active measures to encourage and inspire the utilisation of the possibilities offered by this new development for the much needed improvement of the transportation facilities of the country.⁴⁴

Sending a copy of the draft of this memorandum to Austen Chamberlain at the Treasury, Geddes attached to it an appendix attempting further justification of his point of view against that of the motorists, and set out his basic arguments yet again in a covering letter. The appendix suggested that the motorists' and other objections that a railway ministry would "starve roads in order to force traffic on the railways . . . presupposes a very narrow-minded outlook on the part of the Minister". Separate departments for railways and roads would only encourage competition between the two; this would lead to waste of public money and inefficiency, and would hamper the machinery of government. Moreover, it would be directly opposed to the principles of the Haldane Report. In his personal letter to Chamberlain, Geddes admitted that roads were controversial, but insisted that for reasons of economy and efficiency they ought to be included: "I know of no government department directly concerned which dissents from this principle."⁴⁵

The Cabinet agreed Geddes' proposals for the new Ministry without even discussing the question of roads.⁴⁶ Despite the MLC's protest that the passage of the Bill would "represent the

victory of Prussianism in this country", despite the vocal objections of Joynson-Hicks (supported, he claimed, by nearly 300 other members), despite resolutions forwarded from over 300 local authorities,⁴⁷ the Bill was brought in, and passed steadily through all its stages during the spring of 1919. Introducing it, the Home Secretary declared that the development of the motor car meant that roads could never again be treated as a purely local question. They must be co-ordinated.⁴⁸ To this end, the Bill introduced a system of 'classification' of roads, as the LGB's Departmental Committee had recommended in 1903. Class I roads were to get 50 per cent Exchequer grants, Class II 25 per cent. In committee, Joynson-Hicks objected to any infringement of the independence of the Road Board. It had been created as part of the original Parliamentary bargain between Lloyd George and the motor interests – "and Parliamentary bargains are things that no government lightly goes away from" (perhaps the first public expression of a notion that every coming year was to prove more ill-founded). Motorists, he claimed – in face of the government's firm belief and, indeed, of the historical facts – were satisfied with the working of the Road Board; and no less than 32 county councils had passed resolutions against its abolition.⁴⁹

These arguments were either sidestepped or totally ignored by the government. It was never conceded to the motorists that the Road Board had been part of Lloyd George's original 'bargain', and the certainty of its disappearance is clearly implied in almost every government statement on the subject. Some concessions were made to the motorists, but they were marginal. The Roads Department of the new Ministry of Transport was to be helped to get its fair share of available resources by the device of advisory committees. How exactly these committees were to be constituted, how they would fit into the policy-making process and what their powers would be, was left extremely unclear by the government – for the good reason that at this stage no thought had been given to the subject. Pressed by the motorists to create committees with real executive powers, Geddes avoided the issue altogether with the vague declaration that the committees would be appointed on the recommendation of the various interests concerned – "of which one", he said conciliatingly, "I should certainly think, would be the motor interests."⁵⁰

Meanwhile, the Road Board's life ended amid acrimony. In its

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closing days the chairman, Gibb, handed over to Geddes many of the Board's papers, including the minute book. At the Board's final meeting, presided over by himself, the other three members present resolved that this action was "irregular and discourteous", and agreed to send copies of this resolution to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor.⁵¹ Gibb, on his way back to his job with the North-Eastern Railway, cannot have been greatly perturbed. It was perhaps an appropriately futile and discordant note on which to end.

6

SO REPEATEDLY PROMISED

The regulation of the motor car in the 1920s

At the beginning of the war, there had been nearly 140,000 motor cars on British roads. By March 1918 these had dwindled to 78,000, but within two years their number had more than doubled. (There were nearly as many buses and goods vehicles, and an even larger number of motor cycles.) By Edwardian standards these were enormous figures, and as they continued to grow the problems which they raised again became urgent.

The basic need was to control the increasingly ubiquitous and fast-moving motor vehicle, and to limit the damage which it caused, whether to person or to amenity. This problem had several aspects, such as the control of speed, of noise or of vehicle lighting. There was also the further question of how to protect individuals against the consequences of motor cars, for instance by insuring them against injury. There were, too, continual demands that the problem be dealt with at source, by improving the roads and preferably by building new ones, to be used only by motor traffic.

Some of these problems (accidents, noise) related to motor vehicles of all kinds; and damage to the roads, for instance, was caused mainly by heavy commercial traffic. But although the motor car as such made up only one third of all motor vehicles, to an extraordinary extent it was seen as the heart of 'the motor problem'. This was partly because the private car was much more mobile*; partly also because some of the arguments which attracted most publicity, such as that about the speed limit, were relevant only to the private vehicle; and partly because of the vigorous political leadership given by the main private motorists' organisation, the A.A. But probably equally important was the sense imposed on the whole debate by inter-war governments; anxious to cut down expenditure on roads,

* It went faster and further. The Ministry of Transport estimated that even in 1938, private cars ran 19 miles for every 10 miles run by buses and goods vehicles.

and to keep the railways afloat in the face of growing competition from road transport, they went to some lengths to deny the commercial importance of the latter and to identify it with the frivolous private motor car.

The success of this simple tactic was greatly helped by the activities of the motoring organisations. The AA in particular, under the firm lead of Stenson Cooke, grew both in size and in intransigence. Its membership, which had been nearly 100,000 in 1914, had doubled by 1924, and again by 1931 (although never equivalent to more than about 40 per cent of private car registrations). It fought vigorously self-interested campaigns on almost every issue of interest to motorists: the petrol tax, the Road Fund, speed limits, compulsory insurance. In doing this, it became not only prominent, but also something close to notorious; its critics found its point of view extreme and unrealistic. The AA's relationships with the police were still at times extremely strained. This was partly because motorists resented the selective enforcement of the by now totally discredited 20-mph speed limit (in 1927 the *Motor* noted that even the medium-sized family touring car was expected to reach 55 mph). It was sometimes the result of the AA's own activities; in 1923 the Home Office seriously considered calling in the Director of Public Prosecutions after a complaint by a county police force that an AA scout had declined to give evidence in a dangerous driving case on the grounds that he was not allowed to do so without the AA's permission.¹

Bad relations between motorists and police were made worse by the problems, above all in London, of keeping the traffic moving despite the large numbers of haphazardly parked cars, by specific official campaigns such as the one against noise inspired by Joynson-Hicks at the Home Office, and by minor but nevertheless irritating factors such as the growing part played by cars in crime. In 1928 the *Motor* commented that this last was one of the most disturbing features of modern life, and that it was made worse by the amount of police time wasted in trivial motoring prosecutions. There were other, slighter problems. In the mid-1920s, the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police complained to the Home Office about motorists who left their cars with the engines running. This not only polluted the air ("constables on traffic duty suffer grave discomfort from exhaust fumes, and their health is adversely affected") but made it easy for criminals to jump into the cars and drive off. The Home

Office asked the Ministry of Transport for advice; they were told that idling engines gave off few fumes, and that since most modern cars were fitted with self-starters, even having to start the engine would delay a criminal for only a moment.²

Nor was motoring yet fully acceptable to the many who did not engage in it; throughout the 1920s, press attacks on motorists in general remained common. The industry itself did nothing to counter the bad impression created by the users of its products, and in public – as in its evidence to the Ministry of Transport's Departmental Committee on taxation – created a lamentable picture of confusion and incompetence. In 1928 the *Economist*, noting that motor transport was very vulnerable to public opinion, suggested that the general hostility towards it was caused largely by the industry's failure to create a responsible organisation to wean the public away from the notion of the motor vehicle as a luxury.³ As late as 1938, a Select Committee of the House of Lords concluded that road accidents were partly due to bad relations among road-users, and suggested a propaganda campaign to improve the image of the motor vehicle.⁴

The need to control the motor vehicle had been recognised by the Select Committee on Motor Traffic in 1913. The problem was seen at first mainly in terms of accidents and casualties, although no systematic statistics were available until 1926.* Road deaths were to rise from 4,886 in that year to 7,300 in 1934, a figure which in peacetime was not to be reached again until the early 1960s. The motorists had been insisting since before the war, and it was now widely agreed, that the means of dealing with this problem was to replace the outdated 1903 Act with legislation more suited to the modern world. It was to take over ten years from the end of the war for this to be done. There were various reasons for this delay. There did not exist "a view" about the motor car. It created not one but several problems; opinions about these, and the ways in which they were dealt with, depended on many factors: the technical complexity of the problem, the number, importance and activities of the outside interests concerned, the status of the Minister involved and his determination to reach a solution, the relative political significance of road safety and of other topics competing for Parliamentary time.

* Between 1909 and 1925 the only figures kept were for fatal accidents (i.e. disregarding the number of deaths in any one accident). Fatal accidents involving motor vehicles rose from 373 in 1909 to 1,154 in 1913, and to 2,010 in 1920.

Modernising motor transport law was in fact one of the first problems to which Geddes turned after taking up his post at the Ministry of Transport in 1919. Once the Ministry was formally in existence, the previously surreptitious process of accumulating a staff had speeded up. By the end of 1919 the department had taken shape and had acquired the handful of key officials who were to determine the government's transport policy over the next twenty years. Formally in charge were Geddes himself and, as his Parliamentary Secretary, the Coalition Liberal Arthur Neal.* To help get the department going Geddes had brought with him (as he had done at the Admiralty two years before) a small group of men whom he knew and relied on. Sir George Beharrell, in charge of the Finance and Statistics Department, had worked on the North-Eastern Railway until in the war he had followed Geddes, via the Ministry of Munitions, into military transport in France and in due course to the Admiralty, where he had been Geddes' Director of Statistics. He was to leave Whitehall for the Dunlop rubber company in 1922, but remained at the centre of arguments about the motor car throughout the inter-war years, especially while President of the SMMT in 1927-9. Sir Philip Nash (Director General of Traffic) had started on the Great Northern Railway, and had been with Geddes in the Ministry of Munitions, France and the Admiralty. An equally obvious member of a new transport department was Maybury (Director General of Roads), who also had worked with Geddes in France. Lloyd George later wrote of him: "The mobility of our road transport in the latter part of the war was due in a high degree to his efforts."⁶

In contrast with Geddes' group of railway men, Maybury personally was from the beginning, and long remained, the sole source of departmental wisdom on roads. The railway-minded Geddes was to lean heavily on his advice on road matters; he became unchallengeable, and his veto of projects such as toll-financed motorways was final. A few years later Ashley, then the department's Parliamentary Secretary, could write that if Maybury resigned "his loss would be a most serious blow to the whole Roads Department. . . . You could not get a man of his experience and his wonderful tact in managing

* Arthur Neal (1862-1933): solicitor. MP (Co. Lib.) 1918-22. Parliamentary Secretary, MOT, 1919-22. Lloyd George thought him "a clever man, and a first-class speaker of the Committee type", and gave him the job after hearing him speak on the Electricity Bill.⁵

local authorities.”⁷ (Ashley himself, as Minister between 1924 and 1929, relied heavily on Maybury.) His authority was enhanced by his personal style; the telegraphic address on his notepaper was simply “Maybury, Greenhithe”. He was the occasion of several official reproofs from the Treasury for making public statements at odds with established policy (a speech, for instance, which he made in January 1926 being described by Churchill, in a letter of complaint to Ashley, as “not only inconsistent with the traditions of the civil service . . . but in itself a grave breach of discipline, which is without precedent in my experience”).⁸

One of Maybury’s Assistant Secretaries was Piggott,* a former public-school master and Inspector of Schools, who was to be responsible for much of the policy-making in the roads and traffic field for the next fifteen years, retiring as a Deputy-Secretary in 1934; lucid, witty and remembered by a former colleague as a master of prose style, he was able to establish close relations outside Whitehall, and his contacts with, for instance, senior members of the police and the insurance interests were to be crucial. Working for Piggott as Principal was J. S. Pool Godsell, a shadowy and unimpressive figure; promoted to Assistant Secretary only at the very end of his career in the early 1930s, he was to be closely involved with roads and traffic policy throughout the whole period. One of Beharrell’s Assistant Secretaries was C. W. Hurcomb,† who was to become Permanent Secretary of the department in 1927, a position he held till 1937 – a decade that saw the passage of two major pieces of road traffic legislation. Determined, tough-minded, influential (and a passionate nature-lover), Hurcomb was to become first chairman of the British Transport Commission in 1947.

In October 1919 Geddes asked his Director General of Traffic to look into the whole question of bringing road traffic law up to date. A departmental committee was at once set up, consisting, reasonably

* H. H. Piggott (1871–1951): assistant master, Bradfield College, 1895–1902; H. M. Inspector of Schools, Board of Education, 1904–15; Ministry of Munitions, 1915–19; Ministry of Transport, 1919–34. 1939–45, Regional Transport Commissioner for Southern Region. Knighted, 1931.

† C. W. Hurcomb (b.1883): Post Office, 1906–11; Ministry of Shipping 1915–18; Chairman, Electricity Commission, 1938–47; Director-General, Ministry of Shipping, 1939–41, Ministry of War Transport 1941–47; Chairman, British Transport Commission, 1947–53. KBE 1929, Baron 1950. P. J. Grigg noted of him that he was reputed to be gruff and reserved – “and certainly he has no patience for humbug or wishful thinking”.⁹

enough, of a cross section of the interests concerned; as well as Maybury in the chair, supported by Beharrell and Nash, it included representatives of the RAC (Sir T. Berridge), the AA (Stenson Cooke), the commercial motor users (Shrapnell Smith)*; the bus operators (Frank Pick),† the SMMT (Rees Jeffreys). There were also spokesmen for the police authorities,‡ the local authorities, the Inland Revenue and agriculture. The Committee were asked by Geddes, before they had started work on traffic regulations, to report on the future of the motor taxation system, and it was only in January 1921 that they turned their attention to road safety and, for a start, to the vexed and perennial problem of the speed limit.¹⁰

The motorists had already put forward their own proposals. In 1920 the Motor Legislation Committee sent the Ministry of Transport a complete 'Road Traffic Bill', to be introduced the following session.¹¹ Its main provisions were that all vehicles should be registered; that all drivers should be licensed (although no tests were required); that all speed limits should be abolished, and the public safety secured by a provision directed against any person who "drives . . . recklessly, or negligently, or in a manner which is dangerous to the public . . .". Magistrates were to be given discretion to endorse the licences of drivers convicted of reckless or drunken driving, or of failing to stop after an accident. But endorsements were to be self-cancelling after two years, if no further offences were committed. The rights of motorists as property owners were to be protected; car thieves were to be subject to a penalty of up to ten years' penal servitude for the first offence, and up to fifteen years' for subsequent offences.

These proposals were not even put on the department's policy files. The Departmental Committee also ignored them, and started from first principles. In January 1921 they publicly announced that they intended to consider the speed limit and invited views from the

* E. S. Shrapnell Smith (1875-1952): unsuccessful Conservative candidate 1929, 1931. Leading spokesman for the commercial motor movement until the early 1930s.

† Frank Pick (1878-1941): solicitor. Worked under Sir George Gibb on the North-Eastern Railway and came with him to London to join the Underground group in 1906. Then with the Underground and later London Transport (vice-chairman from 1933) until he retired in 1940.

‡ Represented by F. L. D. Elliott, who had so vigorously argued the motorists' case at the Home Office before the war, and who had now transferred to Scotland Yard.

general public and from a long list of organisations, the bus operators and Lord Curzon, MP.*

The Committee were to hear plenty of evidence, mostly conflicting. The AA and RAC wanted the limit to be abolished altogether, and supported their case with the familiar claim that any limit would encourage motorists to "drive up to it". The several organisations representing local authorities were content to see the limit go, provided that there were effective provisions against dangerous driving. The urban district councils seemed to be hoping for an end to the motor nuisance altogether; they would rather have "a rapid destruction of the roads and a termination of the traffic, than a reasonable speed and a continuance of the traffic". The Home Office, and many of the police witnesses, thought in general that there should be some sort of limit, both in towns and in the open country (where, said the Chief Constable of Manchester, the "light fast-running motor car" was the most dangerous vehicle he had to deal with), although they disagreed about its exact level. The chauffeurs' union thought that it would be inconsistent with public safety to abolish the limit as long as there were no driving tests; it would also be detrimental to motorists, as it would give the police a discretion which might be abused.

Despite these differing views, the Committee did not find it hard to reach conclusions. By October 1921, they had given the Ministry of Transport a rough draft of their report (at which Roads Department minuted the departmental solicitors that there was now no reason for any further delay in drafting a Road Vehicles Bill, "which has been so repeatedly promised").¹² The final version of the Committee's report was signed in March 1922.¹³ They noted that they were the first body ever to discuss the construction and use of all types of mechanically propelled vehicles. Standards of speed, weight and construction had been established in the early days of the industry, since when there had been great improvements; roads had also improved. On the speed limit, they noted – quoting in support the conclusions of the Royal Commission of 1906 – that the public safety was affected by factors other than speed, and that it was wrong in principle to have regulations which not only were not

* Francis Curzon (1884–1964). Conservative MP, 1918–28. An early motor enthusiast, often fined for speeding, he took up motor racing in 1928 at the suggestion of a magistrate, and thereafter for several years successfully raced Bugattis at Brooklands. Succeeded his father as Earl Howe, 1929.

strictly enforced, but which "it is undesirable should be strictly enforced". They added, as though it were a separate argument rather than the basis of their previous one: "Further, the non-enforcement of the regulations is due to the fact that public opinion is against their enforcement." They concluded that the limit should go, but that the regulations against dangerous driving should be rigidly enforced, and that the penalties for offences should be severe (including the suspension of licences). Only the spokesman for the police, F. L. D. Elliott, dissented, arguing that "the time is not ripe for such a drastic change . . . [which] . . . would be attended by the most unfortunate results".

The Committee also agreed in dismissing the idea of driving tests (which would be expensive, inconvenient to motorists, and of little value) and tests of physical fitness (although applicants for licences should be asked to declare that they were fit). They recommended a non-mandatory code of traffic signals. They agreed that drivers must stop after accidents whether or not they were asked to do so; for this purpose, 'accident' included any injury to horses, cattle, sheep and dogs (a select list which was to come in for spasmodic criticism in the years ahead). They concluded that legislation should be brought in as soon as possible.

The first printed draft of the Bill is dated February 1922.¹⁴ For dangerous driving it proposed a maximum of three months' imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for a first offence; up to six months' for the second, and up to twelve months' for the third. It included two quite different proposals related to speed limits. One declared that exceeding certain limits – yet to be fixed – was an offence. The other proposed that if a vehicle exceeded a certain speed – again, still to be fixed – this should in itself be taken as evidence of dangerous driving unless the driver could demonstrate that it was *not*. A concession was made to the motorist in both cases: two witnesses were needed for a conviction (i.e. the lone village policeman making an unsupported guess would no longer suffice on his own). When the Committee's report came out shortly afterwards the penalties were watered down with the introduction of fines as alternatives. The figure of 30 mph appeared in the draft as the speed above which the onus would lie with the driver.

But after this point, activity on the Bill ceased almost entirely. The files were not seen by a Minister for over two and a half years. Partly this was because the department's energies in the road trans-

port field were concentrated on the battles with the Treasury about taxation and the Road Fund,* partly because between 1921 and 1924 it was in a kind of ministerial limbo. When Geddes resigned at the end of 1921 he was replaced by Lord Peel who, unlike himself, was not in the Cabinet. Although the Cabinet rejected the advice of the Geddes Committee that the Ministry should be abolished, they compromised by removing its Minister; when Peel went, after only six months, he was replaced by Lord Crawford, who doubled as First Commissioner of Works. The elderly Neal was left alone in the department.

After the 1922 Election the new First Commissioner of Works, Sir John Baird, continued to double as Minister of Transport. Neal was replaced by Colonel Wilfred Ashley.† The uncertainty about the department's future continued. In January 1923 Ashley was writing at length to Baird, begging him to use what influence he had to prevent the department's dismemberment, and suggesting that if for economy reasons it were to be combined with another department, it should go to the Office of Works:

There are only three offices which could possibly absorb us. The Board of Trade, the Ministry of Health, or your Office of Works. . . . I submit that [the Board of Trade] is already large enough, if not too large, and that to add the Ministry of Transport to its activities would make it unwieldy and lopsided. I am not quite clear what connection 'roads' has with 'trade'.

Now as to the Ministry of Health, it is almost certain that if 'health' absorbed us Sir Henry Maybury, the head of Roads Department, would go. . . . There remains the Office of Works. . . .

If you agree in the main with my ideas I wish you could get in communication with the Prime Minister without delay. . . .¹⁵

Nothing happened. The departments were not combined, but for the next two years the First Commissioner of Works continued to act as Minister of Transport, although without drawing any extra salary. The 1903 Act continued to be renewed annually.

Meanwhile road accidents, and public concern at them, increased. In 1919, motor vehicles were involved in 1,700 fatal accidents; in

* See chapters 7 and 8.

† Colonel Wilfred Ashley (1867-1939): Conservative MP, 1906-32. Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Transport, 1922-3; Under-Secretary of State for War, 1923-4; Minister of Transport, 1924-9. Baron (Lord Mount Temple) 1932. Later Chairman of the Anti-Socialist Union, and of the Anglo-German Fellowship.

1924, in 3,000. Public attention fastened at first on particular aspects of this problem – in 1921, on the many accidents to charabancs. But this gave way to a more general anxiety, which showed itself, for instance, in the growing number of Parliamentary questions about road safety from about 1923 onwards – often coupled with demands for government action. The popular press began to run regular campaigns under titles such as ‘The Deadly Motor Car’, to the indignation of journals such as the *Motor*, whose editor commented in the summer of 1922 that the insults from pedestrians to which motorists had recently been subjected showed that the press was simply fomenting class prejudice.¹⁶ The *Spectator*, in a prescient article, noted that falling prices had now put cars within reach of most people for pleasure purposes, of everybody for business, and pressed for urgent improvements to the roads to avoid the slaughter that would otherwise follow.¹⁷ Exasperated questions in Parliament as to whether or not a speed limit was still in force received replies to the effect that legislation would be introduced as soon as possible. In January 1924, immediately after the new Labour government had taken office, giving Transport a Minister* of its own for the first time since 1922, the *Motor* declared the Bill to be imminent. In February, the *Motor* and the *Commercial Motor* asked the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, to receive a joint deputation; when he pleaded lack of time and suggested that they put their points in writing, the questions put to him included, rather despairingly: “Can the government promise the introduction of a new Motor Car Act?”¹⁸

The Association of County Councils in Scotland, writing in very much the same terms, received a departmental reply signed by Godsell which concluded that

the introduction of a Bill . . . depends upon the urgency of other calls upon the time of Parliament, and, at the moment, it is not possible to forecast when an opportunity will present itself for any action to be taken in this direction, or to indicate the nature of the provisions of any Bill. . . .¹⁹

Like the commercial users, the private car makers were concerned at the perpetuation of outdated technical restrictions. The motorists

* Harry Gosling (1861-1930): Labour MP, 1923-30. Thames waterman and lighterman, and President of Transport and General Workers Union. Minister of Transport and Paymaster-General, 1924.

themselves were irritated – as they had been for twenty years – at the unreality of the speed limit and the way in which it was enforced. The *Motor* commented in April 1924 that “the activities of the police in regard to motorists and their alleged offences have now reached a stage of acuteness which has not been approached for some considerable time”.²⁰ They were also, as they had been twenty years before, growing concerned at the hostility of public opinion towards motoring on the grounds that it endangered the public and was barely restrained by the law.

When the Tories returned to power in November 1924 they not only re-created the post of Minister of Transport but gave him his own Parliamentary Secretary. Ashley became the Minister. He was a conscientious and unimaginative Tory, whose main claims to fame were that he was the famous Lord Palmerston’s great-nephew and that his daughter was to marry Lord Louis Mountbatten. Described by one of his former officials as “a thorough-paced old English gentleman”,²¹ he relied heavily on the advice of officials, and was to prove as incapable of securing Parliamentary time for the Road Traffic Bill as his predecessors. His Parliamentary Secretary was Colonel Moore-Brabazon,* a pioneer motorist and aviator, and himself much later to be briefly Minister of Transport.

As soon as the new Ministers took up their office, Moore-Brabazon was sent the by now considerable bundle of unfinished business in the motor legislation field, under cover of a minute from Piggott pointing out that the draft Bill had not yet been discussed by the Cabinet or by any Cabinet committee.²² In the next few months the Bill was extended to cover the problems both of vehicle lighting and of bus licensing. A draft Cabinet memorandum prepared by Roads Department explained with weary familiarity that current law was “quite inadequate for, and inapplicable to, modern conditions”, and added that “the whole ambit proposed to be covered by the Bill has been the subject of exhaustive enquiries by departmental committees which have been sitting continuously during the past four years and is substantially based on their recommendations, which were in the main of a unanimous character and in conformity with recommendations made by previous Royal Commissions and Committees.”²³ But even this authoritative backing was not enough

* J. T. C. Moore-Brabazon (1884–1964): Conservative MP, 1918–29, 1931–42. Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Transport, 1923–4, 1924–7; Minister of Transport, 1940–1; Minister of Aircraft Production, 1941–2. Baron, 1942.

to prevent the continual re-opening of quite basic questions of principle. In December 1925, for instance, Piggott was still discussing the speed limit with Brabazon; they agreed that it should be abolished but that this proposal should be the subject of a free vote in the House. Later, at Brabazon's suggestion, instructions were sent to the Parliamentary draftsmen, asking if they could draft provisions providing lesser penalties for an offence of 'inconsiderate or careless', rather than dangerous or reckless, driving.^{24*}

Despite all this effort, when the Home Affairs Committee discussed the future legislative programme at the end of January 1927, the Bill was among those classified as "not yet ready, and . . . can stand over for further consideration at a later date".²⁵ The status and future of an independent Ministry of Transport were once more in doubt. Moore-Brabazon had resigned at the end of 1926 to go into business, and had not been replaced. *The Times* had commented that this was the chance to push Ashley up into the Lords and to reconstruct the department.²⁶ (In his Budget speech in April, Churchill was to announce that it was to be abolished altogether, along with Trade and Mines. Only Roads Department was to be preserved, but it was not explained where this was to go.)²⁷ This uncertainty was part of the problem. More specifically related to the Bill was the fact that, after all this time, it had not been possible to consult all the interests affected by it – still less to secure their agreement. The Home Affairs Committee had agreed to discuss the Bill again in ten days' time, if it was ready. Shortly before this second meeting, Ashley sent a copy of the draft Bill to Joynson-Hicks at the Home Office, presumably in the hope of securing his help in pushing it ahead. Hicks was discouraging:

I have had a look through this, and have had a preliminary talk with the police about it. I am bound to say that it will be impossible for it to pass the HAC on Monday, and accordingly I am afraid I shall be compelled to postpone it in order that I may get a full report upon those clauses which impinge upon the Home Office and the police. I think it right to let you know this and am, with deep regret from your own personal point of view, yours ever, Jix.²⁸

After discussions between the two departments Hicks declared himself more or less satisfied with the amended draft; however, he

* The aim of this was to catch the driver who simply "makes himself an obstruction or a nuisance to other users of the highway or even a potential danger".

insisted that this should be circulated only on the understanding that he was not committed on "the controversial points of principle", especially the abolition of the speed limit.²⁹ Ashley had by now devised an extraordinary means for getting the Bill on the move again; in another paper for the HAC, he conceded that the Bill was not yet agreed, but suggested that he should ask the Cabinet for authority to introduce it and *then* "to negotiate with the various authorities and interests with a view to reaching as large a measure of agreement as possible before proceeding with the Bill later in the year".³⁰ It was pointed out in the HAC that this approach would commit the government to the principles of the Bill; would it not be better to circulate it *in draft* to the interested parties, and to try to have it agreed before introducing it? Joynson-Hicks limited himself to a warning that the police throughout the country were in disagreement about the speed limit.³¹ *

The Bill was finally published as a draft, in March. It was prefaced by an elaborate introductory memorandum, explaining that it was circulated only for discussion and that the government were in no way committed to its details. It was accompanied by an official letter – an idea suggested by Joynson-Hicks – which repeated the point, and added:

The Minister's object in circulating the Bill is to obtain the greatest possible measure of agreement with regard to the existing law relating to traffic on roads, before any step is taken in the direction of introducing a Bill in Parliament.

... The Minister will be glad to receive, at an early date, any representations which your [left blank] may wish to make on the subject matter of the draft Bill.

Thus it was that, more than twenty years after the Royal Commission on Motor Cars had reported that the law affecting motor cars was already seriously out of line with technical developments, the government of the day finally brought itself to the point not of legislating, but of circulating in draft, proposals which it did not dare

* Joynson-Hicks' concern seems to have been entirely for the reactions of the police and not, despite his background, for those of the motorists. The *Motor* commented on his change of heart since becoming Home Secretary, and was critical of his reply to a correspondent complaining about stag-hunting. This read: "Nothing can be done unless one prohibits the whole thing; and if stag-hunting, why not fox-hunting, and if fox-hunting, why not shooting, and if shooting, why not every other kind of sport, even including the running down of pedestrians by motorists?"

to incorporate in legislation without the agreement of the interests affected. It was perhaps one degree better than the protracted fiasco of vehicle lighting legislation, which needed a war to get it on to the statute book; but it was far removed from the classic conception of responsible British government. There was not even a formal pretence of a division of spheres between the interests, who might legitimately express opinions, and the executive, free to decide how far to act on these: to submit, publicly, a complete draft Bill to the interests was a strange act of abdication.

Throughout the spring and autumn, inquiries and comments about the Bill came in to the Ministry of Transport.³² Many naturally dealt with the large policy questions, such as the speed limit. The chief constables, circularised by the Home Office, declared themselves overwhelmingly for abolition of the limit. They were not attracted by the alternative provided in the draft. The Chief Constable of Staffordshire wrote to Piggott:

You will no doubt have noted that my fellow-Solomons resolutely turned down the [alternative]. . . . I can't understand why they object to what would make our own position so much easier and what would be a reasonable sop on the one side to those who want a speed limit and on the other to those who don't. . . .

Piggott replied that he too was surprised; he was sorry the alternative had been rejected by the police, as it was "the sort of compromise that would probably appeal to the average MP". Piggott was very conscious of the likely reactions of MPs; when the chief constables wanted to abolish the provision allowing a motorist twenty-four hours in which to report to the police after an accident, Piggott resisted them, pointing out that the clause in question contained new provisions which might be opposed by the motoring interests, and that Parliament would not be likely to pass any "drastic provisions".

Some comments dealt with smaller matters, such as the request from a constituent of the Minister of Agriculture that hens should have the same privileges as ducks when crossing the road. Piggott dealt with this with typical scrupulousness, minuting:

I am unable to find any support for the statement that ducks have greater privileges on the highway than other animals. . . . Possibly the impression that ducks have special privileges as compared with other fowls may have arisen from the fact that in past actions the

accused motorist found it easier to establish contributory negligence on the part of a hen than on the part of the more sedate or more slow-moving duck or goose. Obviously if a motorist with a clear sight of the road in front of him ran down a number of ducks who were slowly crossing the road with the deliberate intention of going to a pond, an action in a court of law against him might probably be successful, but the case of a hen that started to dart across the road and then changed its mind and committed suicide under his wheels would be different.

By midsummer a pattern of reactions to the Bill was becoming clear. Piggott told Ashley that there had been no criticism of the general principle of the Bill. It was clear that, for instance, there was wide support for abolishing the speed limit, and that the main subjects of opposition were likely to be the Minister's power to make regulations and some points affecting highway authorities. There would probably also be demands for extending compulsory insurance to private cars. In general, the Bill did not seem to be controversial.

Another six months had passed before Ashley was ready to put his proposals to the Cabinet. In November, he told the House of Commons that he hoped that the Bill would become law during the present Parliament.³³ (In December, Baldwin told the House that although it was still the government's intention to abolish the Ministry of Transport, the necessary legislation would take up too much Parliamentary time, and therefore Ashley would carry on for the time being.)³⁴ But in February the Cabinet decided that there was no time for the Bill in the present session, and Ashley was forced to admit this to the House.³⁵ All that his officials could do was to tinker with the revised draft and resubmit it to him with the comment: "It may well be worth while to have the Bill ready for introduction" (against which Ashley noted in pencil: "No time to go through").³⁶ When the King's Speech made no mention of the Bill, the *Motor* was gloomily unsurprised, noting this as "an example of the studied indifference of the present and, for that matter, any government to the claims of the motoring community to any sort of consideration from the legislature".³⁷ In March, Baldwin told Ramsay MacDonald that the government now hoped after all to bring in the Bill during that session (at which the *Motor* changed its views, and suggested that the Bill would be less effective as a vote-getter than a reduction in motor taxation).³⁸ But throughout the

summer the government could give no firm date for the Bill, and in November again announced its postponement.³⁹

There was no obvious reason why this process should not continue indefinitely. It was true that road deaths rose from 5,300 in 1927 to 6,100 in 1928 and that, as Hurcomb was to tell his new Minister a year later, "there are few questions . . . which excite more constant and widespread interest".⁴⁰ But the government had lived with 'interest' on this scale for some years now; and although the speed limit in particular was patently absurd, flexible interpretation of the law by most police authorities made it almost workable. Some police forces – such as Surrey, as in the past – still brought charges, and some Benches levied heavy fines for minor offences. Such behaviour predictably aroused the motoring spokesmen to protests against "prejudice against the internal combustion engine or the private individual who takes advantage of the enormous benefits it provides".⁴¹ In London, on the other hand, minor offences, including breaking the speed limit, were handled with discretion by the police, with the approval of the Home Office. (Joynson-Hicks had earlier obliquely acknowledged that moderately exceeding the limit was permissible when he told a questioner in the House that prosecutions had been brought in the Metropolitan area for speeds up to 62 mph, and added: "While the police, with my assent, do what they can to assist the use of the road by motor cars, speeds of anything like those mentioned are quite out of the question within the Metropolitan area.")⁴²

But the mere passage of time, although it could hardly make the Motor Car Act, 1903, more of an anachronism than it already was, at least persuaded the government of the need to appear to be doing something. Uneasily aware of the need for action, yet unable to find the time for it, they fell back on the familiar palliative of a public enquiry. As early as February 1928, Baldwin had announced that the government intended to set up "without undue delay" an inquiry into the need for better regulation of road traffic (and also into the possibility of better co-ordination of internal transport generally).⁴³ In May, Ashley reminded Baldwin of this promise. Baldwin put it to the Cabinet, which settled on the course most likely to postpone action: to announce, shortly before the summer recess, that a Royal Commission would be set up in the autumn. Ashley was authorised to make soundings about a suitable chairman. Two months later the Cabinet agreed on the Commission's terms of

reference and membership (the chairman was to be Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, a former Conservative Minister of Health) and these were announced almost at once.⁴⁴ The Ministry of Transport took care to draft the first part of the Commission's terms of reference ('to take into consideration the problems arising out of the growth of road traffic . . .') so as to exclude any discussion of the petrol versus the horsepower tax. They also had no doubt that its recommendations would be more helpful if its members did not include representatives of all the various interests. Montagu, whose name was among those originally suggested, was rejected partly on these grounds, partly as the result of violent opposition by Maybury.⁴⁵ The King's Speech on the prorogation of Parliament at the beginning of August announced that "the rapid growth of road transport has created new problems which demand investigation".

The Royal Commission started work in November. (The following week Baldwin announced that the government still intended to abolish the Ministry of Transport, but that this would unfortunately be delayed beyond the present session, owing to lack of Parliamentary time.)⁴⁶ But almost at once the government's plans simply to wait for its report were disturbed by a private initiative. Lord Cecil of Chelwood* published the text of his own 'Road Vehicles Regulation Bill', aimed specifically at reducing road casualties. It contained four main provisions. All drivers were to have licences, which were to be issued only to those who were certified physically fit, who had passed a driving test, who knew the rules of the road, and who were insured against third-party risks. The 20-mph speed limit was to be replaced by differential limits for each class of vehicle; and vehicles were to be built so as to be unable to exceed their limit. Local authorities were to be allowed to alter road surfaces so as to compel speeding drivers to slow down. Dangerous drivers were to be automatically suspended for three months.

The motorists were horrified. The AA, the SMMT and the MLC opposed all its main provisions, pausing only to single out the idea of mechanical limitations of speed as among the worst. William Morris said he could imagine no better method of stifling our export trade in motor vehicles.⁴⁷ But much of the comment on

* Lord Cecil of Chelwood (1864-1958): Conservative MP, 1906-10, 1911-23; held various minor ministerial offices, 1915-27. Viscount, 1923. President, Pedestrians' Association, 1929-44.

the Bill was favourable (although the *Spectator* found it "slightly fanatical").⁴⁸ In the Lords, Lord Buckmaster welcomed it as aiming to "avoid the use by rich people of their comforts and conveniences so as to interfere with the comforts and conveniences of people who are poor", and similar comments were made by other speakers.

The government were embarrassed. Cecil's Bill threatened to mobilise the kind of frontal attack on the motor interests that Ministers and officials had been scrupulously avoiding for years (which was, of course, precisely Cecil's point). It might well create a public demand for action more positive than awaiting the report of the Royal Commission. In the Second Reading debate, the government spokesman in the House of Lords, Londonderry, did his best to be conciliatory. The government, he said, were 'fully alive' to the problems of road safety. But regulation must be sympathetic, and must not hinder the development of the motor industry. What was the value of the Bill's speed limit proposals, given that the statistics showed that only $4\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of accidents took place at over 20 mph? The proposals for compulsory insurance would involve "state control of the insurance industry". Worse than any of this was that the Bill proposed to give 'enormous powers' to the Minister of Transport. "Parliament is practically asked in this Bill to hand over motor vehicles bound hand and foot to the mercies of the Minister . . . a very unfair responsibility to place upon any Minister." He hoped that Cecil would withdraw his Bill. There was no time for it, in any case, and the government felt that it would be wrong to promote a road safety Bill while the Royal Commission was actually sitting.

Londonderry was supported by Salisbury, who suggested that a Bill on such a difficult subject would normally be sent to a Select Committee. Why not give it a Second Reading on condition that it was referred to the existing Royal Commission? Cecil agreed to this - on condition that the Commission issued an interim report on 'Road Dangers'.

Ashley asked the chairman of the Commission if this could be done. Griffith-Boscawen replied that he hoped to present an interim report before the summer adjournment. This was passed on to Cecil, who received it without enthusiasm. He commented:

I am suitably grateful for Boscawen's promise of an interim report 'before Parliament adjourns', but . . . it will not be of any use for the

purpose of legislation until the new Parliament meets in the autumn, and if there is a new government they will want time to consider, which means the spring of next year before a Bill is brought in. Meanwhile the tale of death and injury goes on. Surely something might be done before then and I hope the government will be able to make some reassuring statement.⁴⁹

This unco-operative reply at long last forced the government's hand. After eight years of indecision and inaction, with a general election in prospect, they were faced with the danger that road safety might become a truly political issue. Ashley put the problem to the Cabinet in January 1929 in terms notably more urgent than governments had used of it in the past. The motion to refer Cecil's Bill to committee was down for discussion the following week. Ashley reminded the Cabinet that in the Second Reading debate "there was a strong feeling in every quarter of the House that a measure dealing with the further regulation of motor traffic is urgently necessary". After describing his negotiations with Cecil, Ashley concluded:

It must be agreed that the necessity for taking steps to reduce the loss of life upon the roads is urgent. Lord Londonderry has consulted me and we are agreed that it is most desirable that he should be in a position to make a statement . . . that, if the Government is returned to power after the General Election, there will be no avoidable delay in the promotion of legislation dealing with road transport once we have received the Royal Commission's report.⁵⁰

The Cabinet agreed. Londonderry might say that the government intended to legislate when they had received the Royal Commission's report. If the peers insisted, he might – if he thought fit – agree that Cecil's Bill should go to a Select Committee.⁵¹

The government were now caught by the very means which they had devised to prevent themselves having to legislate. They had deliberately delayed the appointment of the Royal Commission so that its report would not appear until after the election. Now that they wanted to act, they needed its report at once. Hurcomb was told to ask Boscawen if the Commission would speed up its proceedings and produce a report on Cecil's Bill by the end of March. This produced a pained letter from Boscawen to Ashley. Cecil's Bill, he said, had been put to them "very suddenly and without previous notice and the Commission, being anxious to assist as far as possible, immediately altered their programme so as to take

special evidence on the points contained in the Bill". Most of these points were very controversial; witnesses would need to prepare carefully, and their evidence to be carefully weighed. He did not see how the Commission could report before July – especially since its proceedings would be interrupted by the election.⁵²

Boscawen might have spared the government this last point. The position was extremely unsatisfactory. They could have no confidence in a Select Committee of the House of Lords (who, as Moore-Brabazon commented a few years later, notoriously had bees in their bonnets on motoring matters). Yet a report from the Royal Commission after the general election would be useless. Their anxiety was reflected in the vague and confusing speech made by Londonderry in the House of Lords. The Royal Commission were to produce an interim report "on this very Bill" during the summer. It would be best to wait for this report. But he then added, without waiting for the reactions, that the government would not oppose referring the Bill to a Select Committee. The critics took advantage of this irresolute line. Russell declared that the Roads Bill should have been passed two years before and that the government were entirely responsible for public irritation at road casualties. Cecil suggested that, given that the Royal Commission had spent its January meetings discussing the Channel Tunnel and railway nationalisation, it was unlikely that its subsequent interim report would be very relevant to road safety. Salisbury could do no more than agree that the Bill should go to a Select Committee.⁵³

The debate was a muddle, as Londonderry admitted in a letter to Ashley:

We did the best we could but the sense of the House wanted 'something done' or an outward expression of movement, interest and horror at the . . . roll of deaths and injuries. . . . I know the difficulties of the Ministry of Transport and how representations have been brushed on one side in view of other business. . . . I really believe that the House of Lords might have waited for the interim report, but for the feeling . . . that the Government really was going to do nothing.⁵⁴

Boscawen was irritated once again, and wrote to Ashley: "We think the Government should not have allowed Bob Cecil's Bill to go to a Select Committee after it had been referred to us, but I suppose it was impossible to stop this in the Lords." He promised the interim report in July.⁵⁵

The five-member Committee included Cecil himself, Russell and Danesfort. In its report, the Committee did not recommend driving tests, altering road surfaces, compulsory insurance (of which they approved in principle, but could not solve the technical problems), or any speed limits ("the Committee recognised the possible abuse of the abolition of the speed limit, but are of the opinion that no limit should be made that cannot be enforced"). But although they did not approve of the Bill as it stood, and could not see how it could be adequately amended, they concluded by begging the Minister of Transport to introduce his own Bill as soon as possible. The long delay since 1927 had "caused great unrest and anxiety amongst those interested in the subject".⁵⁶

Whatever the value of the Select Committee's report, the evidence which it took most usefully summarises the positions of the various interests. The Ministry of Transport, the motoring organisations, the police, the industry, the commercial users, the cyclists, all sent spokesmen to say their customary pieces.

For the Ministry of Transport, Piggott portrayed Ashley as deeply disturbed by his colleagues' failure to take road safety seriously enough or to allow him to introduce the Bill which his department had been preparing for years. "He recognises more strongly perhaps than anyone else that legislation in respect to the regulation of road vehicles is long overdue . . . , and he, I know personally, would welcome the first possible opportunity of introducing legislation in the matter."

On each of the several main topics covered by the Bill, witnesses' views divided along familiar lines. Both the motoring organisations rested their case for condemning the speed limit on the contention that speed as such was not dangerous (according to the RAC witness, it was in fact a "pure good"); if other rules were adequately observed, a high speed could be as safe as a low one. Both insisted that the motor car's responsibility for accidents had been greatly exaggerated. Sixty-four per cent of "motor accidents" were not the driver's fault, according to the RAC. The AA deprecated the "great deal of prejudice" which had been created by "the regrettable frequent use of the term 'motor accident' in the papers, when, as a matter of fact, a contributory cause was a pedestrian or a careless cyclist or a horse-drawn vehicle". The police witnesses were unenthusiastic about speed limits in general, because of the difficulties of enforcing them; and although they found it hard to envisage doing

without them altogether, were vague about their levels. The Metropolitan Police witness gave a vivid picture of how the Commissioner, Sir William Horwood, had arrived at the figure of 35 mph which the police had advocated: "The clause was gradually built up and pressed, and forced up from 25 to 35. He said, 'Very well, 30 if you like', and the last words he said were, 'Go ahead, you can stick out for 35.'"

Police witnesses admitted that, where limits were still enforced, this was done by the traditional means of traps – but only where local inhabitants had complained of dangerous driving. Courts would usually convict on speed-limit charges, although they were very lenient in dangerous driving cases (where the police increasingly had to rely on legal assistance and private witnesses if they hoped for a conviction). This view can be compared with Stenson Cooke's, that the attitude of the courts, at long last, was about right. They were neither too harsh nor too lenient – "We have seen the decline and fall of all that anti-motorist prejudice now."*

In general, although some witnesses – including the Ministry of Transport representatives – welcomed the principles of the Bill, most found much fault with its details. Except among basically "anti-motorist" groups, such as the cyclists, there was little support for tests, mechanical control of speeds, compulsory insurance (although here Shrapnell-Smith was a notable motorist exception), or indeed for the basic notion that there was a 'motor accident problem' which called for special measures. Even the strongest supporters of the Bill found themselves unable to recommend it without qualifications. This, combined with the inept and ill-informed cross-questioning by members of the Committee, allowed the Bill's opponents to make most of the running. It is not surprising that Cecil later declared himself amazed at the large number of pro-motor associations who gave evidence, adding:

Motor manufacturers, automobile clubs, automobile associations one after another came in a kind of procession, all saying pretty much the same thing . . . : "Whatever you do, don't touch the motor trade. . . . It is far more important that we should make our money than that people should be safe."⁵⁷

* One can see what he meant. The average fine for a motoring offence in 1929 was precisely £1 – in real terms, about a quarter of what it had been twenty-five years before.

7

HOW TO PAY FOR THE ROADS

The arguments in the 1920s

For all the attention that government began to pay to the question of road safety at the end of the 1920s, for most of the decade it was completely overshadowed, in political terms, by the other major complex of issues centred on the motor vehicle: the questions of how to tax it, and how to pay for the roads. From well before the end of the war until the general election of 1929, governments and motorists were locked in argument on this question. It was virtually a standing issue between Ministers of Transport and Chancellors of the Exchequer, while on the sidelines motor vehicle and roads interests – and especially those concerned with the motor car – lobbied and protested in usually vain attempts to influence the outcome.

The argument was complicated by a factor which had nothing to do with motor traffic: the use of road-building, among other forms of public works, as a means of relieving unemployment, the major problem of the age. Unemployment gave the Ministry of Transport, enthusiasts for road-building as they were, an invaluable excuse for pressing on with road works at a time when 'economy' was one of the main cries of the day. The Treasury's view about public works of any kind was that they were an extravagant way of using resources that could have been better employed in the private sector, and they resented their complete lack of control over payments out of the Road Fund. The Ministry of Labour always doubted whether road schemes could provide as much work as the Ministry of Transport claimed. This larger debate was the continuing background to the discussions between government and the motorists. In the end it drowned them out altogether.

The problem had several separate, though inevitably closely connected, aspects. The first was the future of the petrol tax. Sir George Murray's doubts of 1909 had been fully justified. Whether

or not a substance was 'petrol' depended solely on how it was used; it was easy to evade the tax by buying petrol ostensibly for any purpose other than putting it in a motor vehicle.* The apparently minor – though complex – technical question of what to substitute for the petrol tax raised major problems of principle. With a petrol tax, the owners of medium- and small-sized cars paid much less for their use of the roads than did heavy commercial vehicles or buses. Whatever other basis was chosen, it would be virtually impossible to preserve the existing distribution. This raised the question of how far it ought to be preserved: was it in fact time the private motorist paid more and the commercial user less? This in turn raised the question of the principles behind road taxation in general. Was the aim simply to raise revenue? Or should levels of taxation be equitably calculated according to the damage done by each type of vehicle to the roads? Or should the aim be to discriminate between different classes of vehicle according to their social, economic or other utility? It was because these large questions lay below the surface that the petrol tax, and its alternatives, was to be such a vexed topic among road-users and government departments.

The discussion had other consequences. As soon as it was accepted – as it was by discussing alternatives at all – that taxation might rest on principles other than the original simple one that road-users should pay for the roads and for nothing else, the possibility was raised that revenue from road-users might be spent on things other than roads. So it was that attempts to tidy up the road-tax system led, by various stages, to the later 'raids' on the Road Fund and the permanent defeat of the principle that road-tax revenue was reserved for roads.

The long debate started with questions about the future of the petrol tax. At the beginning of April 1919, Customs suggested to the Treasury that it was so defective that there was a strong case for repealing it altogether and increasing the licence duty. But how would car-owners react? They had objected so strongly to the proposal to increase the licence duty in 1916 that it had had to be dropped; but they might not object if the petrol duty were simultaneously abolished – so long as they did not have to pay more than before. "I have seen several indications lately that motorists do not

* The Ministry of Transport estimated that in 1919 some 20 or 30 million gallons of non-dutiable spirit were used by motor vehicles.

regard the existing scale of motor-car licence duties as equitable, so they might be in a mood to negotiate.”¹

In his Financial Statement at the end of April the Chancellor, Chamberlain, explained the objections to the petrol tax and announced that he wanted to replace it. But a satisfactory scheme of licensing could be worked out only after conferring with the various interests affected. He would therefore seek the advice of the Minister of Ways and Communications as soon as he was in office.²

Here once again was the fatal eagerness to get the consent of ‘the interests’. The history of the motor car disproves conclusively any idea that close relationships between government and organised interests are a feature peculiar to mid-century politics. From the very beginning policy-makers – both Ministers and civil servants – relied heavily on the advice of the motorists, both because they themselves were unfamiliar with the technical aspects of the issues involved, and because this helped to secure the goodwill of at least some members of a group which was drawn largely from the social and political *élite*. (Walter Long, for instance, made much use of his contacts with Montagu.) Nor, even at this date, is there any pretence that it is only the politicians who are concerned with votes, while officials limit themselves to neutral technicalities. The political history of the motor car between the wars shows clearly how far civil servants considered it – as arguably they must – their duty to assess the political as well as the administrative practicality of alternative schemes. The interests were sometimes ignored, but all too often dependence on them led to a timidity in policy-making that amounted almost to paralysis, less because government was committed to the principles of *laissez-faire* than because the various courses of action possible were barred by the virtual veto exercised by the interests.

There are of course notable exceptions to this, of which the best example in this field is the series of raids on the Road Fund. These exceptions illustrate an exactly opposite tendency: the willingness of government to take some actions which were deeply unpopular with very large and influential sections of the electorate, in what appeared to be the wider national interest.

In the discussion of the petrol tax, the interests at once took up the suggestion that they should be consulted. Joynson-Hicks hoped that the Chancellor would do more than simply consult the Minister of Transport: “I do suggest that the trade interests know far more

about the question of motor traffic than the Minister of Transport, who is a railwayman pure and simple." He asked Chamberlain to set up a small committee to discuss possible tax changes.³ Chamberlain stalled. He refused to commit himself to appointing a committee, but insisted on his desire to consult and co-operate with all the interests concerned. Three weeks later, in terms which had been familiar in public discussions of the motor car ever since the legislation of 1896, he asked the motorists for advice: could they, in their technical wisdom, suggest an alternative to the petrol tax which would bring in the same revenue?

This well-meant invitation led to a minor demarcation dispute between Chamberlain and Geddes. This began with a letter from Geddes to Chamberlain: "Joynson-Hicks told me yesterday . . . that you had asked him, with a committee, presumably, of his associates, to prepare for you proposals as to motor taxation in the future. . . ." Geddes went on to suggest that his own Roads Advisory Committee – whose significance he had defended against such criticism during the debates on his department – ought to be consulted on such matters. Could he and Chamberlain

not work a little more closely than appears to be the case in the present instance? . . . Joynson-Hicks, together with some of his associates, will very likely be upon the statutory Roads Advisory Committee, and I would like it very much if you could see your way to let me deal with motor taxation there. . . .⁴

Chamberlain replied soothingly. He explained that he had in public and in private invited the motor-users to put up proposals for an alternative tax. "Of course I always intended to consult you before taking any action upon them, and I shall be most glad to consider any suggestions that you yourself may have. I have appointed no Committee, but I presume that Joynson-Hicks has got together some of his friends." Chamberlain concluded that he himself would greatly prefer to replace the petrol tax with a better system.⁵

Geddes' plea for his Roads Advisory Committee was in fact somewhat specious. Nothing had been done to select the members of this committee, which was not to meet until the following February. The task of discussing the future of motor taxation was in fact given to the 'representative' *ad hoc* committee which had originally been asked to think about road traffic legislation.

Whatever the arguments of expediency for giving this committee

the task of discussing taxation as well, the outcome was in fact disastrous. Virtually the only proposal on which such a group, embracing all the principal interested parties, could agree was that the *status quo* be continued. There is no sign that Geddes ever told the Committee of Chamberlain's desire to replace the petrol tax; thus free from restrictions, the Committee produced a report in a month, recommending that the petrol tax be continued at a single flat rate, and that the vehicle tax should be reviewed. It thus produced the one proposal that the Treasury had hoped to avoid, and failed to deal with the central question of the vehicle tax.⁶

The only dissenters were Maybury and the representative of Customs. Forwarding the report to Geddes, Maybury asked urgently for the chance to discuss it with him before the whole embarrassing subject was raised with the Treasury. Maybury's objective was to persuade Geddes that the Committee's proposals were unrealistic. He pointed out that the existing petrol duty was already being evaded on an enormous scale. He was convinced that a vehicle tax would be the fairest way of dealing with the matter and would produce the most revenue.⁷

Thus briefed, Geddes wrote back to Maybury in his role as chairman of the Committee, in an attempt to challenge the whole basis of their advice. He suggested that, since a very large proportion of the cost of road-building would have to be met from the petrol duty, it was important to see what the trend was in petrol consumption. He then cited the evidence given to him by Maybury, and observed drily: "This is to me a very remarkable result. . . . One has only to look at the streets and roads throughout the country to see the enormous increases of commercial motor vehicles and heavy charabancs, and yet there is no material increase in the half rate duty spirit." Why was this? It was no use adopting a basis of taxation which nominally taxed road-users according to their use of the roads, but which in fact let them use them free of charge. He asked the Committee for a further opinion on the one central fact: "Is a petrol tax a comprehensive and accurate and equitable method of taxing road-users upon the principle that the more they use the road the more they should pay?"⁸

If Maybury had hoped that by refusing to accept the Committee's advice Geddes would induce them to produce a simple alternative, he must have been extremely disappointed. Preserving

the *status quo* by continuing the petrol tax, with all that this implied in terms of light taxation for private and commercial vehicles alike, was easily agreed upon. But any move away from the petrol tax would mean re-opening the whole question not merely of the incidence of the tax, but of the relative shares of private and commercial users.

In the Committee rows broke out at once. Stenson Cooke for the AA and Rees Jeffreys for the SMMT refused to abandon the petrol tax, at which Pick said that "if the private car interests now dissented from the scheme he also would have to dissent on behalf of the omnibus interests". Maybury tried to soothe the private motorists by pointing out that "the heavy car interests had agreed to rates of taxation being imposed which were more onerous than those suggested for private cars". But the Committee would agree to a vehicle tax – which was of course unrelated to road usage – only if the Treasury would guarantee that any money thus raised would be spent exclusively on roads (no matter how large these sums might be). Despite Maybury's attempts to persuade them to let him put the case informally to Geddes, the Committee formally resolved to demand such a guarantee from the Chancellor. Only the Treasury representative and Stenson Cooke abstained from this resolution, the former for obvious reasons, the latter because he and the AA would not accept a vehicle tax on any conditions.⁹

Maybury forwarded this resolution to Geddes, with a covering note explaining that the Committee was very reluctant to propose a vehicle tax, and that both the private and commercial interests would strenuously oppose it unless they could get a guarantee. "A Parliamentary bargain was arrived at in 1909, when the petrol duty was imposed, and it is now asked that a similar bargain be made as a condition precedent to the industry agreeing that a vehicle tax be imposed." Geddes was requested to secure this assurance before the Committee's next meeting.¹⁰

Geddes was greatly taken aback. He told Maybury that although he agreed in principle, it seemed "rather a pity that the resolution of the Advisory Committee should be couched in the terms adopted, especially as an official of the Ministry, namely yourself, was in the chair. I hardly think that it is the best way to get a matter of this kind considered fairly, for an Advisory Committee to bargain so flagrantly with an Exchequer matter." Maybury, in a personal note, agreed that it was inadvisable for such a committee to pass such resolutions.

But the Committee, led by Berridge, had rejected his own offer to intercede with Geddes. Maybury went on:

It will doubtless be within your knowledge that, at the passing of the Development Funds and Road Improvement Act, Sir Thomas Berridge was a member of the House, and was one of those who was a party to the bargain which was made with the then Chancellor (the present Prime Minister). You will agree that the Committee is a fairly strong one, and fully representative of the interests concerned. With men like Sir Thomas Berridge and Sir Harcourt Clare, it is not easy for the Chairman to guide them on a particular line of action.¹¹

It is hard to see that any chairman, by this stage, could have persuaded this committee to abandon the principle that the proceeds of a petrol or any other tax must be spent on roads. This principle had in fact already been confirmed, and an unequivocal 'pledge' given to the motorists which has haunted Chancellors and bedevilled discussion of roads finance ever since. To understand it, it is necessary to go back to the summer of 1919.

When the war ended the private motorists were determined to defend their own position against other road-users and to keep their share of taxation at its low level. At the same time they were united with all road-users in working to ensure that motor taxation was spent only on roads. This was, after all, what Lloyd George had promised in 1909, and the basis of all existing arrangements. There is no sign that they saw the logical connections between questioning the petrol tax and questioning the sanctity of roads-tax revenue; their main anxiety, having lost the battle against a "Ministry of Ways and Communications", was lest a railway-minded Minister of Transport should take for railways what was meant for roads. In July 1919, Joynson-Hicks brought a deputation from the MLC to secure pledges from Chamberlain about the future of motor taxation. The time for argument about the shape of the Ministry of Transport was past; what was now required were some limits to its activities. The deputation asked that the Treasury should earmark the revenue from motor taxation for use on roads, so that the Minister of Transport could not divert it to railways. They also wanted an undertaking that any such arrangement would continue at least for several years, so that they could be sure of the income for

a long-term roads programme. Chamberlain obligingly put his head into the noose. "I have no intention", he said,

to annex the duties permanently as a general contribution to the finances of the country or to apply them permanently, at any rate insofar as the pre-war yield, which Mr Lloyd George allocated, is concerned. I have no intention whatever of going back on that understanding or of keeping that for any purpose except roads when the abnormal contribution [i.e. the £8½-million grant provided in the 1919 estimates] ceases.¹²

This was exactly what the motorists wanted. Three weeks later, during the Finance Bill debates, Joynson-Hicks asked Chamberlain to repeat his pledge in public. Chamberlain obliged, and in case the point might not be clear, added: "I have no intention of going back on the original bargain or understanding between the present Prime Minister when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer and the motorists who co-operated with so much public spirit with him."¹³

To this pledge the Ministry of Transport was heir and executor. When Geddes took up office in the autumn of 1919 his first task, as for any new Minister, was to find out what, if anything, was his department's policy in the several fields for which it was responsible. For his officials the problem was the same, plus that of picking up the threads of policy which the war had broken. The area in which policy was most obscure, and the tangle of commitments from the past most complex, was that of motor taxation. Between and within the Ministry of Transport and the Treasury there was some confusion as to what had been decided and what now should be done. Transport officials clearly assumed that the old independent Road Improvement Fund would die with the Road Board; it would be amalgamated with the general tax system, and the new roads authority would have no private purse. Beharrell advised Geddes that in future the costs of roads would probably have to be met from out of the Ministry vote; the Treasury would want to close down the Road Improvement Fund as not being under direct Parliamentary control. But, he suggested, various 'understandings' had been reached in the past, and the Cabinet might want to take account of these in settling the amount that Parliament should be asked to vote for roads.¹⁴

Geddes found this confusing. He turned, as so often, to Maybury for advice. "I am not clear", he minuted,

whether we should make a fight, when the time comes, to keep the hypothecated income from petrol taxation for roads. There will no doubt be resistance to this, and I would like you to put someone on at once to look up all the justifications and arguments brought forward for the hypothecated income when it was first started, and also all the Parliamentary bargains, undertakings and so forth, both at the time when it was imposed, and also when, under the Finance Act of 1915, it was withdrawn. Extracts should be made, so that we can see how strong a case there is, either for retaining the hypothecated income, or for resisting the hypothecation in the future.¹⁵

Maybury's reply illustrated one of the problems of being in a new department. There were no files on the previous history of motor taxation, and his account was thus drawn entirely from *Hansard*. Quoting at length from Lloyd George's Budget speech of 1909, he surmised that "this rather indicates that the government had already negotiated and come to an agreement with the motorists".¹⁶ Round this surmise the discussion of motor taxation in the 1920s (and beyond) was to revolve.

Beharrell had been right about the views of Treasury officials. The independent Road Improvement Fund was an anomaly which they would much have preferred to see disappear. Niemeyer* minuted Blackett, the Controller of Finance, in December 1919:

On general grounds there would be a great deal to be said for stopping the existing assignment of the motor spirit duty and certain motor licences to the Road Board Fund, and making provision in the ordinary way on the Vote for the Ministry of Transport. This would free our hands with regard to the taxation of motors and make it easier to reduce expenditure on roads when this seemed advisable [which, as Blackett noted in the margin, was of course precisely the argument of the motorists against such a change].

But, Niemeyer went on, things were not so simple. There were certain drawbacks to this course; and it was "in any case not practicable politics in view of the pledges made in connection with the last Budget".¹⁷

The pledges were the main obstacle. In keeping alive the memory of Lloyd George's original arrangements, they have been part of political argument about roads finance ever since. Why Chamberlain gave them is not entirely clear. He plainly did not do so under

* Otto Niemeyer (b.1883). Treasury, 1906-27 (Controller of Finance, 1922-27); Bank of England, 1927-52. KCB, 1924.

pressure from the Ministry of Transport (which was not even in existence at the time he made his statements), and equally plainly was not advised to do so by his own officials. Chamberlain was in no sense "Lloyd George's man", and had indeed accepted the post of Chancellor with some reluctance; but perhaps the most plausible explanation for his willingness to preserve the Fund was its close association with Lloyd George himself – who had introduced it only ten years before, against the advice of some of the same officials who would now have preferred to see it abolished. It is noticeable that in repeating the pledge during the Finance Bill debates, Chamberlain went out of his way to emphasise that the bargain with the motorists had been made by "the present Prime Minister when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer". When defending the arrangements against criticism from other Ministers at a meeting chaired by Lloyd George, Chamberlain flatly declared that "the question of principle had been settled in 1909".* It must also be remembered that it was still not clear how much money might be demanded for the roads (the programme put forward by Rees Jeffreys in the name of the Road Board had envisaged spending £30 million in the first year of the post-war programme), or how much would be produced by motor taxation. In this situation there was, from the Treasury's point of view, something to be said for keeping the roads self-supporting and thus continuing to insulate the Treasury from the demands of the road-users and local authorities.

In agreeing to recommend a vehicle tax only on conditions, the motorists were thus consolidating a position of which they already felt reasonably secure. The Treasury, although forced for the moment to concede this position, were determined not to go a step further. Geddes and Chamberlain met in February 1920 to discuss the Departmental Committee's request.¹⁸ After the meeting there was a characteristic disagreement between the two departments over what exactly had been agreed. Maybury's note of the discussion recorded Chamberlain as saying that he no longer thought it worth pressing his request for a sum equivalent to the product of the war-time petrol tax. He therefore agreed that the whole product of the new scheme should go to the roads, less – a typical bit of traditional Treasury economising – the costs of running the scheme and the £500,000 which till now the Treasury had paid annually to local

* See p. 185, below.

authorities in place of carriage licence duties. But – according to Maybury's note – it had also been agreed that this should all be contingent upon the new scheme bringing in as much revenue as was needed and expected, and that the Ministry of Transport should not ask the Treasury for help with roads finance at least during the next financial year (the implication being that they might need to in future years).

When the Treasury saw the draft of Maybury's note, they insisted that Chamberlain had agreed only that if the new scheme were accepted, the Treasury should be relieved of any responsibility for financing the roads. This was a good deal less than Geddes had hoped for, as he at once pointed out in a letter to Chamberlain: "The new motor taxation is, I think, very problematic, and . . . I do not think it is unreasonable that I should have made the proviso that the new taxation should approximately raise the sums we believed it would, and at the time you agreed to this".

This produced an irritated and somewhat patronising reply from Chamberlain. Geddes must have misunderstood him in thinking he had agreed to such a condition. If the Committee could not work out an effective scheme he would be ready to discuss the matter further with Geddes; but this was unlikely. If they could,

then it will be your duty . . . to defend these proposals in the House, and to secure their introduction into law. In fact it is for the Committee to frame a scheme for new taxation which will produce the yield required, and it is for you to secure the acceptance of the scheme by the House and to see that it is not whittled down, so as to destroy the whole purpose of our agreement, which was that the motor car users, if relieved by me of their liability to pay taxes to the Exchequer, should tax themselves sufficiently to secure the sums required for the maintenance of the roads.

Geddes wrote back that there was really nothing in dispute between them.

When you introduce your Budget, the Minister of Transport must be on the Bench with you, to justify and defend the taxation, the understanding being that the motor taxation is levied on the road users in order to enable them to pay the total additional cost of improvement and maintenance of the roads. That is the understanding of what we aim at.

If I fail, it is for the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Minister of Transport of the day to settle the call of any matter upon the state, subject to reference to the Cabinet.

Chamberlain urbanely replied that this account of the matter was satisfactory to him, and that he would give Geddes all the help he could when the new taxation came up for discussion in the House. When the Committee next met, Maybury was able to tell them that the undertaking had been given.

Meanwhile, the road-users had got together to discuss their next steps. At a meeting organised by the RAC and held at the AA at the end of January, all the main interests represented on the Departmental Committee were present. Berridge explained to them that the purpose of the meeting was to give the private motorists and the commercial operators the chance to discuss their differences of opinion privately rather than airing them openly in the Committee. After some discussion all sides were apparently satisfied that although the existing petrol tax was the fairest system, they could accept a vehicle tax at the rates for each class proposed by the Departmental Committee. It was agreed that if the tax produced more revenue than was needed, the rate for private cars should be reduced to 15 shillings per horsepower, and for all other vehicles proportionately.¹⁹

This might have been thought the end of the matter. But the AA's apparent agreement with these proposals was illusory. They had from the beginning strongly resisted the vehicle tax, as slightly increasing the tax burden on the ordinary private motorist, and – as Stenson Cooke had argued in the Departmental Committee – as penalising the moderately well-off man who, perhaps for reasons of economy, owned more than one car (as other men, he suggested, owned more than one suit to prevent it wearing out). Despite its formal bargain with the commercial interests, the AA began an intensive campaign – which soon won over the SMMT, as manufacturers of private cars – against a vehicle tax at whatever rate. Circular letters were sent to MPs urging that the petrol tax should be kept. Extremely accurate forecasts of the Committee's conclusions, and bitter attacks on these, began to appear in the popular motoring press from January onwards.²⁰ (However, when Geddes told the Committee that he disapproved strongly of leaking their discussions to the press, all present, including Cooke, agreed with him and insisted that they had revealed nothing.)²¹

Stenson Cooke also refused to subscribe in any way to the conclusions of the Departmental Committee. In their report,²² presented to Geddes in March, the majority agreed that the petrol duty

should be replaced by a five-fold system of vehicle duties; for private cars, the rate was to be £1 per horsepower (with a minimum flat rate of £6). They regretted that the Chancellor insisted that road-users should be taxed to pay for the roads, and hoped that this question could be re-opened when conditions improved. Berridge (for the RAC) signed the majority report, although commenting that a fuel tax would have been preferable. Rees Jeffreys (for the SMMT) signed, but suggested that the rate for cars should be 15 shillings per horsepower for the first year at least. Stenson Cooke submitted a long dissenting report of his own. In the abrupt style that was to remain typical of his (and of the AA's) public manner, he declared that the vehicle tax proposals were "not only unsound in theory, but in practice will operate in an unreasonable and inequitable manner". A heavy initial tax on the vehicle which disregarded how much it was used, was unfair to the owners of cheap, low-speed cars, to the owners of two or three cars and to owners who used their cars only occasionally or at weekends. A vehicle tax would discourage motoring and damage the industry.*

By the end of March, the AA had succeeded in generating enough opposition at least seriously to worry Chamberlain. After a Cabinet meeting he handed Geddes a note:

I am uneasy about your road taxation. I see a storm brewing in 'The Times'† and elsewhere – especially on the line that the Committee tax the small car too heavily.

I must rely on you to carry through the negotiations, and to get a sufficient public opinion on our side. . . .²⁴

Geddes mobilised his own team. He told Maybury:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has drawn my attention to the apparent opposition to the new proposed motor taxation – information as to which has leaked out. . . .

* Rather similar arguments were being put forward at this time, although in a very different style, by Walter Long. Writing to Chamberlain, he suggested apologetically that a vehicle tax was unjust, since it fell but lightly on the rich with their high-powered cars, while hitting the poorer people "who are compelled in these days to keep a car in order to get about at all". He proposed a petrol tax instead; and went on, having opened the subject of taxation, to suggest that in the same way the cost of a game licence fell unduly heavily on the man who shot only rarely, and that it should be replaced by a tax on cartridges.²³

† Which a few days before had simply forecast the Committee's proposals under the heading 'Higher Taxes on Motors'.

Will Sir Henry Maybury get in touch with Mr Neal, and explain to him what arrangements he is making and in what way Mr Neal can co-operate in them for obtaining support from the local authorities, the commercial users, etc., who support the taxation including, I understand, the RAC, as we will have considerable opposition from the AA.

This is an urgent matter as Mr Chamberlain requires us to deal entirely with it. . . .²⁵

The new arrangements were announced by Chamberlain in his Budget speech; he said that he proposed 'substantially to adopt' the recommendations of the Departmental Committee, although the new tax would not be introduced until the following January.²⁶ The news was not welcomed by the motorists. Joynton-Hicks reminded Chamberlain that the Committee had declared that "any tax on road transport is bad", and hoped that at the end of the present emergency road maintenance would once again become an Exchequer responsibility. He also asked whether the Committee - "which is very largely a committee of government servants" - had been told at the outset that the petrol tax must go. It seemed probable; after all, Chamberlain had asked him last year "if I would get my friends together and try and form a taxation scheme other than on petrol".²⁷

Geddes replying, brushed aside these complaints. The only outstanding disagreement was about the best means of raising the money required for the roads - and in fact every main body of road-users represented on the Departmental Committee had agreed that if the petrol tax had to go, the vehicle tax was a reasonable substitute. It was unfortunately not possible to reduce the horsepower rate to 15 shillings. "This was in the nature of a bargain, and, if you are going to reduce by 25 per cent the tax on private vehicles, it would have to go through the whole scale, and we should lose the revenue." Geddes denied emphatically that the Committee were ever told that the petrol tax would have to go²⁸ (which was later to be again insisted on by Joynton-Hicks - and again denied).²⁹ *

The position was indeed as Geddes had outlined it. The vehicle tax, although not welcomed, was broadly accepted - except by the AA. Throughout the summer the AA and the SMMT, working through the MLC, continued to press for any alternative scheme which would throw a larger proportion of the burden on to the

* Geddes had of course failed to pass on Chamberlain's request.

HOW TO PAY FOR THE ROADS

commercial users. By May they had worked out a scheme which would rest on a universal tax of 4½d. a gallon on all imported petrol (i.e. with no rebates for commercial users), plus a 50 per cent increase in the inland revenue fee for private cars and motor cycles, and a vehicle tax on all other vehicles. This scheme was publicised in the press and urged on Geddes by a large deputation led by Joynson-Hicks in July.³⁰

The main commercial users wanted above all to see that a workable system of roads finance was set up. They had had some difficulty in reaching agreement with all the other users, and, despite the large increase in taxation which the government's proposals meant for them, were anxious to see them implemented. The Standing Joint Committee of Mechanical Road Transport Associations, representing commercial, bus, electric, steam and circus interests among others, sent a statement to all MPs, and to selected Ministers, supporting the vehicle tax proposal; they argued that although it meant tripling the tax burden on commercial vehicles, while adding only a tenth to the private motorist's, the schedule of duties agreed by the Chancellor should not now be disturbed: "A disturbance of one item must result in a re-opening of the whole settlement."³¹ Shrapnell-Smith wrote to *The Times* making the same points. His letter produced an instant reply from Stenson Cooke, arguing that very few vehicles were running on untaxed fuels, and protesting against the unfairness of a vehicle tax which took no account of how much the vehicle was used: "It is common knowledge that the majority of users of private motor vehicles are unable to use them on more than one or two days a week" (an argument most damaging for the familiar claim that the motor car was not now a mere weekend toy, but a necessity of daily life). Smith replied the next day. He disdainfully suggested that the AA's opposition to the vehicle tax was quite ineffective. This was just as well, since if they succeeded in keeping the petrol tax, this would have to be at least doubled to raise the revenue required; if they managed to have the vehicle tax reduced to 15 shillings, it would mean that "a bargain to which the AA is party must be broken by the AA".

Cooke replied that Smith's first point was inaccurate; his second was "as incorrect as it is unworthy". Smith, in a further letter which triumphantly ended the correspondence, referred the AA to the 'compact' between the road-users reached in January. The Ministry

of Transport figures showed that the whole proceeds of taxation on the basis then agreed would in fact be needed. "The present therefore is not the time to initiate claims for revision of the agreed basis, and much less for concessions to private car-owners to the detriment of commercial owners."³²

The Ministry of Transport, in the middle, were mainly concerned to preserve the settlement they had reached. They were prepared, privately, to concede some of the motorists' points; Maybury told Geddes that motorists were in effect taxed for the relief of the rates, in that the revenue was used as much for maintenance as for improvement purposes. But this distinction had proved unworkable in practice; and, "after all, if it were not for the mechanically propelled vehicle, there would really be no great road question".³³ But there were to be no concessions. Although the department's original objection to the petrol tax had been that it was unworkable, they now defended their proposals mainly on the grounds that a bargain had been reached and an arrangement made. As Maybury told the Ministry's Roads Advisory Committee two years later: "It is a fact that until 1920 at no time was a commercial vehicle of any sort taxed. . . . It was a very big thing and if I pride myself on anything I did it was to get the commercial people for the first time in 1920 to pay half the total cost of the tax."³⁴

Maybury argued that attacks on this settlement came either from interests who were not themselves road-users (e.g. the manufacturers and dealers), or from the private motorists, whose aims were both selfish and frivolous. Thus he pointed out to Geddes that the MLC's proposals would mean taking all the increased sums needed for roads from the commercial and agricultural users, leaving the private motorists' contribution virtually unchanged. He argued that the MLC, despite its protests that it represented a wide range of road-users, was largely financed by the AA (as was indeed the case), and he treated Joynson-Hicks throughout this period as merely a lightly disguised spokesman for the most extreme of the private motorists. When the MLC came to see Geddes in July, Maybury pointed out to him that apart from the Auto Cycle Union and RSAC - "all pleasure motorists - the gentlemen forming the deputation to you do not represent associations of users of the roads and thus not vehicle-tax payers".³⁵

The Ministry of Transport's position was greatly strengthened both by disagreements among the road-users and by the tactics of

the AA. The AA, making much of the fact that it alone had fought for the petrol tax, kept up the struggle. Advertising for new members, it commented: "What a powerful force motorists would be if only they were organised and banded together as members of an organisation pledged to fight. . . ." But its own efforts came in for some hostile criticism; a back-bench MP said of its circular on the petrol tax that "a more selfish attitude on the part of a body like this could not be imagined".³⁶

It was this 'selfishness' which allowed the Ministry of Transport to isolate the private motorists and to treat their demands as entirely unreasonable. As Montagu, writing in the *Autocar*, sadly observed, the motoring community as a whole would have preferred to keep things as they were; but the mutual jealousy and suspicion between the AA and the RAC prevented any common action and let the Ministry of Transport do very much as it chose.³⁷

8

PROSPERITY AND PANIC

The motor industry, the Slump and the Horsepower Tax

The stalemate over the petrol tax grew more irksome to the manufacturers, and their cries for help shriller, as it became increasingly clear that drastic changes were taking place within the motor industry. Many makers of private cars saw themselves threatened with ruin. The government and the other roads interests, on the other hand, found it easy to show that the market for cars had never been stronger. To understand the situation it is necessary to look briefly at the development of the industry in the years immediately after the war.

In March 1920, there were 187,000 cars registered in Britain; eighteen months later there were 242,500. After the relative austerity of the war years, the motor car was prominent among the symbols of peace and luxury. Paying attendances at the Motor Show, which in 1913 had been over 156,000, in 1919 were 227,000. Membership of the AA had been nearly 100,000 in 1914; by 1924 it had more than doubled. Prices of used cars had risen during the war to something over their original cost when new; with the removal of restrictions on the use of petrol, prices rose still further. Thus an imported American model which had cost £250 in November 1918 was selling at £500 six months later; pre-war model light cars which had been £185-195 in 1914 were going for £300-400 second-hand. The rise in prices of new cars was even more striking. The last pre-war model of the Singer Phaeton, produced in 1915, had cost £195; the comparable 1919-20 model cost £500.* Prices started high, and continued to rise, despite the rush of new manufacturers into this inviting market. Buyers sometimes found that when their cars were actually delivered the price had risen by anything up to £200 since they were first advertised.¹ In the spring of 1920,

* These money increases were, however, largely offset by the very sharp fall in the purchasing power of the pound since 1914.

advertisements in the *Autocar* showed very few cars, even pre-war models, offered at less than £400.

It was not surprising that many investors saw the motor business as a potential goldmine. Between 1919 and 1920, forty new makes of car were introduced; and between 1920 and 1925 a further forty-six. The *Economist* commented: "If one wished to moralise on the credulity of human nature, a fit subject might be that of motor-car manufacturing companies." Many new companies, the writer went on, simply acquired empty premises, and issued prospectuses with photographs of cars and generous estimates of profits, never previously having made a car.²

It is not surprising that this boom failed to hold, even before the downward turn of the economy in 1922. By October 1920 the *Autocar* had noticed a distinct drop in second-hand prices over the past six months; six popular makes were selling for between £100 and £300 less than in July. (Even so, in money terms these prices were still well above what they had been in 1914.) But several factors combined to knock the bottom right out of the speculative motor trade. The immediate satisfaction of pent-up demand brought second-hand prices down from their dizzy level. The coming of the Slump in 1922 did still more. And the development of truly large-scale production by, above all, Morris and U. K. Ford, brought about a lowering of unit costs and prices with which most manufacturers simply could not compete. Production of Morris cars rose from 1,932 in 1920 to over 3,000 the next year and to 50,000 in 1924; the Ford plant on Merseyside turned out 1,919 complete cars in 1919, about 15,000 the next year.³

Prices fell as production rose; the two-seater 1919 Morris-Cowley, which had initially sold at £465, was reduced to £375 in January 1921; on the eve of the Motor Show the same autumn it fell to £285, and by a further £10 the next year. The average price of Morris cars was about £400 in 1920, about £225 in 1921. This was deliberate policy on Morris's part. Other manufacturers did their best to follow suit; Swift advertised in the *Autocar* of 19 February 1921: "In the event of any further reduction in the prices of their cars, Swift . . . would be pleased to refund, to those purchasing cars now and up to 1 June, 1921, any difference between present prices and such prices as may then be current." Other firms made very similar offers.

It was hardly surprising that some firms could not stand the strain. Total production of cars rose from 71,000 in 1923 to 132,000

in 1925. But between 1921 and 1925 there was a net decline in the number of manufacturers (despite the entry of 86 new firms during the same period) of 35. Between 1922 and 1929, the number of firms was to fall by over half.⁴

The motor industry and the motorists insisted that this was a crisis and that the only remedy was to reduce taxation. The Treasury firmly resisted Geddes' attempts to commit the government publicly to tax reductions (although they could not prevent his hinting at them when he talked to the motorists in private). But if taxation could not be reduced, at least its form could be changed. When Geddes retired, Neal was left as the only Minister in the department. In the face of the AA's continuing campaign he promised that the conclusions of the Departmental Committee would be reviewed. In 1922 he asked the Committee to reconsider its earlier advice: could no better system of taxation be devised, or could the existing system not be modified "to meet the objections made against it"?⁵ Maybury, with great reluctance (it may be assumed that he had resisted re-opening the matter at all) once more became chairman; Nash had by now resigned, Sir Harcourt Clare had died, Beharrell was about to resign and be replaced by Hurcomb, and Rees Jeffreys was to resign at the end of the year. Thus partly reconstituted, the Committee embarked on two years of wrangling.

It was primarily these discussions which gave birth to the now firmly established myth that the British motor industry between the wars was almost ruined by the insistence of a short-sighted, inexpert civil service on retaining a form of taxation which hampered the design of British cars and prevented them selling in export markets. In fact the long campaign against the horsepower tax gained much of its momentum from the industry's need to blame the government for their troubles, once it had become plain that their demands for a return to the petrol tax and for an all-round cut in taxation were being ignored.

Initially, the opposition to the vehicle tax was largely the work of the AA, trying to offload some of the private motorist's burden on to the commercial user. Various other interests concerned with the private car joined them in arguing that the tax would cut down sales and use of private cars. The essence of this argument was that it was wrong to tax the vehicle, and that the level of the tax was too high. At this stage it was not suggested that one form of vehicle tax might be better or worse than any other. But as it became increasingly clear

that the Treasury would not agree to reduce the tax, the motor interests shifted the focus of their criticism to the precise form of the tax – its basis on the unit of horsepower. The survival of the horsepower tax is often cited as a classic failure of politicians, and especially of civil servants, to understand the basic problems of industry, still less to take action to deal with them. In fact, if blame is to be allocated, it must be shared at least equally between government and industry. The inability of the road interests to agree on abolishing the vehicle tax produced a stalemate. This allowed the manufacturers to claim that they were being ruined by the form of the tax. But the manufacturers were equally unable to agree among themselves that the form of the tax should be altered. The civil servants for their part, in failing to take the initiative and impose a solution on industry, were restrained by accepted views about the proper relationship between government and industry which were (and in many ways still are) fundamental to the political culture of the age.

The so-called "horsepower" formula had been devised in 1906, and adopted by the RAC. Drawn up at a time when the power of the motor-car engine was closely related to the cylinder capacity, the formula was intended to be used as a guide to the buyers of cars in comparing prices. When two years later Lloyd George proposed additional taxation to finance the Road Board, the horsepower formula provided a convenient basis for the new system. Discussing Lloyd George's proposals in 1908, the RAC resolved that if taxation were to be increased, the horsepower formula would be the best possible basis.⁶ The new system was introduced by the Finance Act of 1909–10.* The Act also empowered the Treasury to make regulations defining how 'horsepower' should be calculated. When Joynson-Hicks proposed to write a formula into the Bill itself and to make this binding for at least five years, the Treasury declined,

* The rates charged increased with horsepower, but not proportionately. They were as follows:

over 6½, but not over 12 horsepower	£3. 0s. od.
„ 12 „ 16 „	£4. 4s. od.
„ 16 „ 26 „	£6. 6s. od.
„ 26 „ 33 „	£8. 8s. od.
„ 33 „ 40 „	£10. 10s. od.
„ 40 „ 60 „	£21. 0s. od.
„ 60	£42. 0s. od.

on the grounds that developing technology might make changes necessary at any time.⁷

Although the Treasury may have hoped for flexibility, the formula of 1906 was rapidly built into the structure and assumptions of the motor industry as a whole. A technical committee set up by the Treasury in 1911, including representatives of both industry and users, advised firmly that the horsepower formula should be kept.⁸ In support of this recommendation they used the two characteristic arguments which are to be found again and again throughout the history of governmental regulation of motor vehicles and which explain, even if they do not excuse, much of the failure of the government to take more positive action. The committee argued that the horsepower tax should be kept, first because "the majority of those interested in the manufacture and use of motor cars are in favour of this course"; and secondly, because any change would "lead to a good deal of inconvenience to persons who have made arrangements for manufacturing or dealing in cars in classes suggested by the present system". The horsepower tax was kept. It was to be kept for the next thirty-five years.

The main effect of a system which linked taxation and cylinder diameter was to discourage the sale and manufacture of cars with engines of short stroke and broad diameter, and indeed with large engines generally. The British industry was already unable by 1914 to compete on level terms with the much greater output of the American industry. The tax provided an additional reason for concentrating on a speciality with which the Americans did not compete, and did not think it worth competing – the cheap, light car.

By 1920 the tax was already basic to the whole manufacturing strategy of the British industry. But in that year it became far more important when on the advice of the Departmental Committee the government introduced the new scale of taxation rising by £1 per horsepower. The Model T Ford, at 22.5 horsepower, now paid £23 a year instead of six guineas as before. The incentive to turn out small-engined cars was very real.

The new tax scale did not create the British light car which in conception went back before 1914. Nor were small cars peculiar to Britain: it is true that by 1938 three-quarters of British output consisted of cars of 12 horsepower or less, but in the same year two-thirds of cars sold in Germany (where there was no vehicle tax) were of under two litres.⁹ The tax did not immediately drive the

Americans out of the British market, as the Ford production figures show, but it did provide some protection against imported cars, and in the early 1920s this made it hard to abandon. Leaders of the industry, against the background of the shattering changes in the industry's structure in these years, seem to have felt that almost any departure from the *status quo* might be fatal. At the same time, they increasingly blamed the nature of the tax for their failure to do better overseas. As early as 1922, Maybury could tell his Department's Roads Advisory Committee that, much though he would like to abandon the horsepower rating, it was impossible: "The SMMT are against me."¹⁰

This ambivalent attitude underlay the extraordinarily confused and often acrimonious discussions in the Departmental Committee after 1922. The Committee had at once tried to widen their field of enquiry by asking the various 'representative' organisations for their views. Meanwhile the AA extended its own lobbying efforts, circularising the commercial users, as they had earlier done the private motorists, urging them to press for a return to a petrol duty. They did not win any significant support. Nor did the Committee's enquiry produce any fresh ideas. By October 1922 a single scheme had been put forward, proposing a tax on all imported motor spirit (with exemption for non-motoring uses), backed by the familiar list of the supporters of a petrol duty: the private motoring organisations, the industrial and trade organisations (and conspicuously excluding the commercial users and the bus operators, both of whom were later to give evidence strongly opposing a petrol duty).

In an attempt to bring the arguments out into the open, the Committee's meetings were held in public from early 1923. The records of these meetings, and the Committee's Interim Report, with its many reservations, which was the eventual product, show how widely the various road-using interests disagreed; they show also how far the private motoring organisations supported by the manufacturers were responsible for the Committee's failure to reach any agreement. The manufacturers' support was made less valuable (and the Committee's discussions still more confused) by their almost total inability to present any kind of a case – which reflected their fear that some change in the existing system might expose them to foreign competition. The pursuit of objective truth was not helped by the forensic style of the Committee; mainly made up as it

was of representatives of the various interested parties, the examination of witnesses became an increasingly open contest between Committee members to feed 'their' witnesses with stooge questions to help them to make their case, while trying to discredit any witnesses who seemed to be speaking for the 'other' side.¹¹

The advocates of a petrol tax claimed that the vehicle tax was preventing the spread of car ownership and was ruining the motor-car industry. Their opponents aimed to show – and had no difficulty in doing so – that output and home sales of British cars were growing at an unprecedented rate, and also that exactly the same was true of British Fords, which might have been thought extremely vulnerable to the tax because of their large cylinder capacity. Thus the first witness examined in public, Sir Arthur Stanley for the RAC, claimed that perhaps 50,000 cars were idle during the first quarter of 1922 as a result of the petrol tax. The cross-examination that followed was to be typical of many others. Shrapnell-Smith, trying to demonstrate on behalf of the commercial vehicle operators that the motor was still a luxury, suggested that many of the larger cars at least were idle because their owners were out of England between January and March – “say, in the South of France”. Pick, for the busmen, tried to persuade Stanley to agree that the bus was socially more useful than the luxury motor car, and should therefore pay less tax. Stanley refused to comment on this. But when Pick pointed out that although the RAC and other organisations had claimed that the vehicle tax had prevented the “normal” increase in private car ownership, the increase in registrations between 1921 and 1922 had in fact been 17½ per cent, Stanley was forced to comment. He had to admit that he had no idea what a “normal” increase might be.¹²

Stanley was a relatively coherent witness compared with some of those that followed. The president of the SMMT (who was the managing director of the Humber company) was reduced to declining to answer questions either about motor taxation as a whole or about practices in his own firm. Pick finally turned despairingly to Maybury in the chair: “Mr Chairman, it is very difficult; the witness has no general opinion and he does not seem to wish to help with a particular opinion.”¹³

The President of the Association of British Motor Manufacturers was also a director of Thorneycrofts, the builders of heavy commercial vehicles; having told the Committee that the petrol tax

could not be evaded, he became increasingly rattled after Shrapnell-Smith had quoted a passage from a Thorneycroft brochure claiming that commercial vehicles could avoid the tax altogether by using Thorneycroft's patent paraffin vapouriser. He too was driven to refusing to answer questions; when Pick suggested that the recent increase in motor-car registrations might possibly be regarded at least as normal, the witness replied: "I will not accept that it shows anything."

He refused to discuss the horsepower capacity or the price of Ford cars, or how often cars of varying engine sizes were seen on English roads. (Pick: "Which is the most common car you see in England?" Witness: "Then I will say I leave it to you, partner.")¹⁴

The chairman of the committee which had proposed the motor-spirit tax, Brigadier-General Sir C. Holden, became involved in a philosophical argument about the nature of motoring; having claimed that the motor car was not, as Pick had suggested, "an instrument of pleasure", he was asked about Sunday drivers. To this he replied: "A certain number of those no doubt are going out for what they consider is pleasure."¹⁵ The argument that the private car was a pleasure vehicle, and could thus justifiably be taxed as a luxury, was to be raised again and again, especially by Pick.

Among the other witnesses were various chemists, private and official, called by the different interested parties in support of their arguments that it was or was not possible adequately to define motor spirit for the purposes of working out an unevadable tax. No such definition could be found, despite all the attempts of the AA to work out a formula. The Committee argued, with Stenson Cooke growing increasingly desperate, far into the summer of 1923. After his final evidence had been interrupted by a particularly bitter argument between Cooke and Pick, the government chemist withdrew from the Committee with an ironical, "I wish you a happy issue as a result of your deliberations."¹⁶

The desperation of the private motor interests, as it became clear that a petrol tax would not be workable – largely owing to the difficulties of defining "motor spirit" – led them into attempts to subvert the Committee by other methods. A campaign was instigated, apparently by the AA, of complaint against Maybury and the other members of the Committee as having deliberately obstructed

agreement on a petrol tax. Lord Weir * wrote to Ashley pointing out that 'the motoring movement, including the trade' had not so far indulged in public propaganda, but they might be driven to do so unless they could be convinced that a genuine effort was being made to devise an alternative system of taxation. Weir warned that this could only be bad for the government.¹⁷ At a private meeting of the Committee in March 1923, Maybury quoted complaints made by the motoring organisations to the Minister of Transport about the Committee's slowness in reporting and about the whole conduct of the enquiry. Although Sir Thomas Berridge (representing the RAC) stated that he had no knowledge of the correspondence and had not been consulted about it, Maybury proclaimed that he had "tendered his resignation as Chairman - a position which he had never wished to occupy - to the Parliamentary Secretary . . . who had however, refused to accept it". The other official members of the Committee said that they would resign if Maybury did so, as did Pick and Shrapnell-Smith.¹⁸

Nobody resigned, and the Committee continued in being. But it made little progress. By the summer of 1923 relationships between committee members were so bad that full shorthand transcripts were kept of almost all its meetings. Baird † was by now beginning to worry about the lack of progress, and asked the Committee to report before the Parliamentary recess. This appears to have alarmed various members; Straker, the SMMT representative, said that he would need to refer his position back. At this point Maybury said despairingly: "We shall have an interminable business. You must address yourself to the matter as members of the committee and not as members of organisations."¹⁹ This was precisely the problem. As representative of interests, the committee members found it impossible to agree on any single solution.

By the following spring, although the government had changed, the committee was still sitting. Agreement looked further off than ever. Pick circulated a provocative paper arguing that private cars were used mostly for pleasure or luxury, and supporting this with

* William Weir (1877-1959): a Glasgow industrialist frequently consulted by governments on industrial matters. He had held various Ministerial posts during the war. He was offered, but refused, the post of Minister of Transport in Baldwin's 1924 government. President, Royal Scottish Automobile Club. Baron, 1918; Viscount, 1938.

† The First Commissioner of Works, who was still acting as Minister of Transport.

traffic census evidence showing that many more cars used the Brighton road at weekends. Straker commented that "it is sheer waste of time to further analyse the mass of mis-statement and grotesque theories put forward by Mr Pick in defence of an inequitable system of taxation". Stenson Cooke, observing that Pick's paper seemed aimed at securing preference for buses and lorries, added that the car was now 'mainly a utility vehicle', while many buses were run for pleasure purposes.²⁰

The Committee received a memorandum from the Ford Motor Company, and a request to be allowed to give evidence. The Ford witnesses (who, by comparison with the spokesmen for British firms, were well-briefed, unprevaricating and articulate), protested against the unfair weight of the horsepower tax on the Model T Ford, and added that the company might be forced to give up its plans to concentrate in England all production for the European market. They proposed, as the best of several alternatives, that taxation should vary in proportion not to cylinder diameter but to the actual horsepower developed by an engine running at a specific speed.²¹

The MLC now tried a frontal attack, lobbying Labour Ministers as they had earlier lobbied Conservatives. They wrote to the Chancellor, Snowden, asking him to receive a deputation from the eleven organisations who had submitted the proposal for a petrol tax to the Committee.²² They were reported as 'gravely dissatisfied' with the Committee's failure to reach any conclusion after fifteen months. The Treasury asked Transport for advice. Maybury, asked in turn, suggested that it would be pointless for any Minister to receive such a deputation: the MLC was well represented on the Committee, which included at least three members of its affiliated bodies. They thus well knew how things were going. He was sure that Gosling would agree that to receive the deputation "would be a sheer waste of his time". Gosling did so agree. The day that he did so, he received a letter from one of his own back-benchers, J. Toole, urging him to meet the deputation. On being rebuffed in turn, Toole replied that he doubted "whether more influential representations could be made than by the deputation you have been asked to receive". He suggested that in the atmosphere of the Committee the organisations felt it hopeless to expect impartial treatment. The Committee's report was being deliberately held up, and it had entirely lost the confidence of the motor trade.

After a further refusal, Toole replied, in words very like Weir's the year before:

I am sure that strong dissatisfaction will be felt by the various powerful organisations of motor owners, the motor trade, and hundreds of thousands of individuals up and down the country. Apart from the merits of the case, I am quite certain it will do the Party a great deal of harm.

Refused again, Toole turned to Snowden. It was common knowledge, he claimed, that the Committee's report had been delayed by the interests which should be paying a higher tax than at present; in so doing, they were cheating the owners of light cars and motor cycles out of a tax reduction to which they were legitimately entitled. Toole was not mollified by a reply showing that it was not the commercial interests who had delayed the Committee, and wrote again charging that "the vested interests and departmental officials are stronger than those in our party who have been charged with the control of those particular matters". When Roads Department were again asked for advice on how to reply, Godsell answered that the action of Stenson Cooke, who was responsible for the whole of this agitation, was most improper. It was entirely due to the AA's campaign against the vehicle tax that the Committee had been reconstituted. Although the private car interests were most adequately represented on the Committee, they had not helped it to produce a workable solution. In the circumstances, Godsell concluded, it was

quite unprecedented for a member of a Departmental Committee, whilst the Committee is sitting, and without not only the approval but without even the knowledge of the other members of the Committee, to endeavour to obtain interviews with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with a view to putting before them an entirely *ex parte* statement on a matter which is under consideration by the Committee. . . .

Gosling wrote to Snowden on these lines, and there the matter rested.

It was in the middle of this confused situation that the Labour government, inspired as much by their dependence on Liberal support as by conviction, removed the McKenna duties on motor cars. It was not easy to show what the effects of the duties had been,

nor whether removing them would damage the industry. The *Economist* commented in the spring of 1924 that, up till then, demand for cars had been so great that the duties had had little protective effect; they had simply kept out some of the more expensive foreign cars and had helped the government to raise revenue.²³ William Morris, whose statements in support of protection were to become increasingly wild as the years passed, was already claiming that removal of the duties would cost a million men their jobs.²⁴ * (Snowden later referred publicly to Morris's "ramping, raging, lying campaign".²⁵) The government never troubled to refute such claims, or to produce reasoned arguments for removing the duties; Ministers were committed to this step, and officials seem in general dutifully to have accepted that it would be taken.

The nearest to a fully argued case that survives on the files is the rather leisurely speculations assembled by the Board of Trade as a brief for the Prime Minister's meeting with a manufacturers' deputation in April.²⁶ It was admitted that British production of 'touring cars' had been hard hit by the war, which had allowed the American industry to develop its designs and to get a foothold in foreign markets. Nonetheless, the British industry had done well in a very competitive situation. The questions were whether they had done well because of the duties, and whether removing the duties would damage the industry. The Board of Trade could not give positive answers. They suggested that the duties had probably helped British manufacturers in their post-war concentration on the small car, and seemed to have influenced foreign makers to establish themselves in Britain. (It was true that by this time Ford, for instance, were deliberately reducing the proportion of imported parts in the cars which they made up in Britain.²⁷) The brief then went on, with evident lack of conviction, to argue that there had been no good reason before the war why the British motor industry should not compete effectively; "and equally there is no inherent reason why it should not do so now. . . . It is certainly not in a weaker position to meet foreign competition than many quite unprotected industries here." It was probably now out of the transitional stage which the duties had been aimed to help it through, and it was at least possible that "the fears of the British makers will prove to be much exaggerated".

* The *Economist* estimated at this time that the motor industry gave employment, directly and indirectly, to at most 125,000 men.

The brief concluded with some general points. If it were accepted that protective duties were bad in principle (a heavy hint that they might well not be), there was no valid reason for maintaining ones which had been meant to be only temporary. The complaints of the motor industry showed all too clearly how vested interests always developed behind tariff barriers. It was true that the industry had suffered as a result of the war, but it was now doing quite well and had no claim to preferential treatment over other industries.

Despite the inadequacy of the official case, and despite the protests of Morris and others (and a prolonged Commons debate in May on a Tory motion of censure on the government for proposing to remove the duties),²⁸ the duties were removed. Briefly, from August 1924, the British motor industry was left to face world competition without the protection of a tariff.

By August the Departmental Committee had at last completed their task. Their report, signed in June 1924, fully reflected all the divisions that had marked the discussions.²⁹ After a long historical review, the majority of the Committee considered that there were various defects in the existing tax system, but that any of the alternatives would be worse. This was particularly true of the petrol tax. They suggested that vehicles which damaged the roads less should pay less tax (although there should be exceptions for the heaviest vehicles of all - which rather undermined the principle); and that whenever it should be possible to reduce the total amount of revenue from motor taxation, motor cars and vehicles taxed on a horsepower basis up to 25 hp should have the first claim for a reduction of up to 20 per cent (although no arguments were presented in favour of this concession to private motorists).

On the horsepower basis of the tax, they noted the objections made about its effect on engine design. They accepted that the tax fell disproportionately heavily on American cars, and on old British cars, many of whose owners were men of small means. But they felt that the case for changing the basis of the tax was considerably weakened by the fact that Fords sold very well on the British market; this suggested to the Committee both that the tax did not fall prohibitively heavily on Fords, and that British manufacturers need not design special engines for the home market. The Committee concluded that the tax probably ought to be changed; but since they could not reach a decision on this technical matter, they suggested

that a special technical committee should be set up, and invited the motoring organisations to discuss the matter further there.

As a whole, this report was far from conclusive. But even so, it was signed only by the official members (including Elliott for the police) and the local authority member. There were five minority reports. Pick and Shrapnell-Smith argued that although the case for the petrol tax had been demolished, the Committee's 'recommendations' had been put forward only as a compromise; there should now be a much wider review of the basic principles of motor taxation and roads expenditure. Each signed another separate dissent dealing with detailed points of interest to the bus and commercial vehicle operators respectively. Stenson Cooke and Straker, putting the private motorists' case, insisted that a petrol tax was entirely practicable. No good reason had ever been given for repealing the original petrol duty (whose continuation had been recommended in the Committee's unpublished report of December 1919). The arguments about the purposes and the tax-liability of the vehicle-owners, which had been put forward by the big transport operators who were anxious to escape the proper charges, applied equally to doctors, users of motor cars for business reasons, and to many owners of "so-called private cars which are substantially used for utility purposes". It was quite wrong to suppose that the distribution of tax should be related to "ability to pay" or "purposes of use"; this reflected a totally false conception of the present and future development of the so-called private motor car:

There would indeed be a poor prospect for this great industry if its growth were dependent upon 'luxury use'. . . . A vast number of persons of small means are the owners of motor cycles and light cars, and the progressive use of mechanically-propelled traffic in private ownership is a matter for encouragement by the legislature, as bringing with it advantages that are desirable both nationally and socially.

The final reservation was that of Sir Thomas Berridge, for the RAC, who found himself unable to sign the main report or the AA's dissent. He could support neither the proposed motor-spirit duty nor the existing distribution of tax. After a tribute to Maybury as chairman, Berridge put his finger on the main source of the Committee's difficulties. Its very constitution, he argued, and the various interests represented by its members, made it almost

impossible to expect agreement. "The great desire of the official members of the committee seemed to be to secure certainty of revenue and . . . ease of collection, and every other member of the committee was pressed by the consideration of some special interest of which he had greater knowledge than the other members of the committee."

For the time being, this was the end of public discussion of the petrol tax. But the Committee's report marked only the beginning of the campaign – confused, disingenuous and ill-formed as it was – against the form of the vehicle tax. The iniquities of the horsepower tax rapidly became part of the conventional wisdom. In a Commons debate in March 1924, it was said that the tax had "compelled manufacturers to build and design a type of engine which the foreigners will not buy".³⁰ The *Economist*, at about the same time, suggested that taxation was only one of the reasons why British motorists preferred British cars: "however useful the Ford may be in a rough country, the new type of British motorist does not like it. He or she wants a high speed engine or car, paying a small tax, and giving a long mileage per gallon of petrol. This type of car is now being turned out here in huge quantities at a very low price." But two years later the *Economist* writer's opinion had hardened to the extent of asserting that it was mainly the form of the tax which led British manufacturers to concentrate on lower-powered light cars.³¹

At the end of August, Piggott wrote to the RAC (not, it may be noted, to the SMMT). The Minister of Transport, Piggott said, would be glad to hear, through the Club, the views of the organisations concerned on the Committee's recommendation. So much had changed since the horsepower formula was first worked out by the RAC and the SMMT that they might well think the time had come to change it. Since they had been so closely identified with the formula throughout, the Club might care to refer it to a "thoroughly representative technical committee".³²

The result of this suggestion was a reply from the RAC, five months later, whose existence the apologists for the motor industry never acknowledged. It was a flat refusal to do anything to co-operate. The Club, wrote its secretary, was always glad to help. But they were not eager to accept the present invitation:

Having regard to all the circumstances, it is not considered that an alteration in the existing formula would be to the advantage of the

industry or of the general body of motor car owners, and the Club would therefore prefer not to be identified with an enquiry which it does not consider would serve the interests of the great majority of those who would be affected by the result.

Three days later the RAC added that its views were supported by both the SMMT and the AA.³³

Given the later history of the tax, the importance of this reply can hardly be overstated. Throughout the 1930s the motor industry, and sympathetic critics, were to complain that it was being robbed of export sales by the obstinacy of governments. But the industry never admitted, and neither Ministers nor civil servants took the initiative in pointing out, that they had been given the chance to suggest an alternative; and that, because of their own disagreements, their anxiety not to make any changes in the tax structure which might help their competitors, and the protection given by the tax against American imports, they had rejected it. Outside observers, and from time to time insiders such as Leo Amery or Churchill, fastened on the idea that to change the tax would open up a glittering future for the industry: but invariably their well-meaning support was frustrated by the industry's inertia. It took the vigorous and unconventional Moore-Brabazon to say publicly what nobody else would. In a remarkable letter to *The Times*, written in August 1926 while he was still at the Ministry of Transport, he argued that "inequitable as the horsepower tax is, it has had a very serious influence on the English manufacturer of motor cars. Had it not been for this tax the light car of low horsepower and high efficiency would never have come to have been the main product of this country and the admiration of the world." The tax had made it possible for Morris to compete successfully with Ford; was the British industry – sluggish and 'self-satisfied' as much of it was – capable of competing without this extra protection?³⁴

But this was only one of several points of view held within Whitehall. The official public line of the Ministry of Transport was rather different. They knew well what was wrong with British cars in export markets. Characteristic were complaints reported from Australia in 1927: that they were too expensive, that they did not have a standard wheel-track, that their clearance was too small, and they were under-powered. The question was how far these faults were due to the tax. The Ministry of Transport asked several

British manufacturers whether the tax affected their own models. They disagreed widely. Standard considered that the tax did restrict design; Swift, Vauxhall and AC were confident that it had had no effect at all; Singer thought that although its abolition might in general encourage a different type of engine, they would not alter their own designs.³⁵ In 1928 the SMMT told Churchill that no alternative formula would help so long as the rate of duty was as high as at present. The only possible solution was to reduce the rate to be paid on British-built cars, while maintaining it for imported cars. This not surprisingly was turned down by the Board of Trade, on the grounds that it would conflict with our treaty obligations. The proposal also failed to overcome the unspoken Treasury objection, argued by the Ministry of Transport, that it would reduce the total revenue from motor-car taxation. The SMMT had tried to meet this objection in advance by arguing that in the long term the Exchequer would not lose, as the average horsepower of cars sold in Britain would go up and the total revenue would therefore remain the same. The Ministry of Transport doubted this, suggesting that more powerful vehicles cost more to run, and therefore sales would be fairly sticky. They did, however, consider the possibility of artificially shifting demand from the smaller towards the larger models by raising the taxes at the lower end of the scale. But they saw political objections to this, as well as to reducing duty on the larger models: "While the proposal to reduce the rate of duty on the cars above, say 12 horsepower, would in itself be open to criticism, on the grounds that the owners of the larger and more expensive cars were being favoured as compared with the owners of 'baby Austins' and cars of similar type, the proposal to impose upon these low-powered cars an actual increase in tax would no doubt evoke strong protest."³⁶

Ministry of Transport officials came gratefully to accept that any alteration in the *status quo* was virtually impossible. On the one hand the Treasury insisted that a new system of motor taxation must produce the same revenue as at present, while on the other the manufacturers refused to accept any change which did not reduce taxation. The Ministry of Transport fell back on the argument that the remedy was for the industry itself to change its manufacturing policy. In the memorandum which the Ministry of Transport sent to the Treasury at the end of 1928, summarising their objections to the SMMT's requests, they concluded:

It appears that whatever system of taxation prevailed here, owners of moderate means would still demand the existing type of car, owing to its lower running costs. If this view be correct it would be necessary for the British manufacturer, in order to maintain the home trade, and also to secure the dominion markets, to build separate European and Dominion models.³⁷

It was not of course for the Ministry of Transport to suggest how this might be done, or indeed to say whether it was practicable at all. The Treasury themselves, although Churchill accepted that there was some relationship between tax, design and exports, came increasingly to agree with Moore-Brabazon that the tax did provide valuable concealed protection. In his 1928 Budget speech Churchill regretted that he had not been able to reduce the horsepower duty. But he went on to suggest that although such a change might help British car sales in the Dominions, it was equally possible that the industry gained from the tax as it stood.³⁸

Whatever judgements may be made about the story of the horsepower tax – which was to have further instalments in the 1930s – it is clear at least that there was no single monolithic official view on the matter, and even more clear that the tax was not simply kept by an obstinate government against the insistence of an industry eager for change. It was, if anything, mainly the timidity and indecision of the industry which kept the tax in being for so long. Two comments may perhaps fairly be made on the government's handling of it. The first is on the helplessness of officials inexperienced in the fields they are dealing with. Nobody in Whitehall knew anything about the motor industry. The Ministry of Transport was the main point of contact with the manufacturers and, on occasion, acted as their spokesman in Cabinet. But Transport's concern with the industry was merely a reflection of their concern with road-users; on production matters they dealt with the industry in the same arm's-length style as did the Treasury. Their view of the effects of the horsepower tax, built up over time by Piggott and others, was no more than the assessment of the average intelligent outside observer; the evidence which could be offered in support of it was strictly impressionistic. The second comment relates closely to the first. It was at least partly because officials knew so little about the motor car that they were so dependent on the advice of the manufacturers and so reluctant to take action where this advice was not unanimous. This suggests, at the very least, an important qualification to a familiar account of

policy-making in modern British government. It is commonly claimed that policy is often effectively dictated by outside interests, and that they have this power to dictate because they and civil servants are so closely in each other's pockets, and because civil servants need their co-operation. The history of the horsepower tax shows quite clearly that official reluctance to act without the full agreement of the motor industry was quite consistent with an extremely formal and distant relationship.

9

BREAKING A BARGAIN

The Treasury campaign against the Road Fund, 1919-29

One reason for the energy with which during these years the motorists had argued about the form of motor taxation was their confidence, after 1920, that they had finally won the battle over how the tax revenue should be spent. Chamberlain had promised the Departmental Committee in March 1920 that the proceeds of the vehicle tax would be spent exclusively on roads, and they had heard nothing to contradict this since then.

But, unknown to them, the battle was breaking out again. The Treasury had already refused to go a step beyond what they had already agreed to; the drafting of the Roads Bill was held up for months while the Ministry of Transport tried to persuade the Treasury that since the Roads Department provided services for clients other than motorists, its expenses should not fall entirely on the Road Fund ("the Minister apprehends that he is likely to be subject to serious – and irrefutable – criticism in Parliament if it transpires that the whole costs of the Roads Department are being made a charge upon the proceeds of the tax . . ."). The Treasury thought this unreasonable. Niemeyer minuted Blackett:

We have made a very substantial concession to the roads in giving them the whole net produce of the motor taxes, in spite of the urgent demands on the Exchequer for money, and without urging against them the entire change in the financial position of this country since the policy of the Road Fund was set up in 1909. It was a condition of the Chancellor's bargain at the time that the roads should get nothing more from the Exchequer. . . .

Chamberlain, advised on these lines, agreed. The proposals that the Exchequer should bear part of the Roads Department's expenses were "absurd. . . . There is no reason or moderation in the demands of the motor people. They ought to stick to a bargain which has been very advantageous to them."¹

While failing to get anything more from the Treasury, the Ministry of Transport were already defending the Road Fund against attack from another quarter. In October, the Cabinet's Unemployment Committee proposed that the Ministry of Transport's road-building programme should be speeded up; £4.5 million should be spent on schemes in Greater London, and £2.5 million should be given to a new Executive Committee for making grants to provincial authorities.² This was an obvious threat to the Ministry's independent control of the Road Fund; Geddes told the Cabinet that the sums in the Fund had been contributed by motorists exclusively for maintaining and improving existing roads, as "agreed to by them on a definite understanding". Neal, in an appendix to Geddes' paper, claimed that to use the Road Fund in this way would be "a definite breach of the bargain made by the motor community when they assented to the report of the Departmental Committee . . . a definite breach of a Parliamentary bargain [and] a breach of faith by this Ministry with the local authorities which had been promised funds in aid of their expenditure upon existing roads".³

There was clearly something wrong with this argument, as was immediately pointed out in Cabinet. The bargain which had been made with the motorists - and not with the local authorities - had never distinguished between expenditure upon existing roads and the construction of new ones, and whatever confusion an accelerated roads programme might cause to the local authorities, it could hardly be objected to as being in breach of contract. It was also pointed out - presumably by the Treasury spokesman present - that when the Treasury had agreed to waive their claim to the proceeds of motor taxation they had done so "on the express condition that no further claim would be made on the Exchequer"; in other words, any roads programme, whether accelerated or not, must be financed out of the Road Fund. The final result was a compromise whereby the Ministry of Transport was to find the money, while the Treasury would do all they could in making or approving loans, so as to ensure that the maintenance programme did not suffer.⁴

This argument was barely concluded, with the question of principle more glossed over than resolved, when precisely the same issues came up again in the discussion of the draft Roads Bill. There was some critical comment in the Home Affairs Committee of the

provision that the unspent balance of the motor-tax revenue should remain accumulating with the Ministry of Transport. Although it was explained that this had been agreed with the Treasury, the Treasury representative "suggested that the Treasury had not agreed to more than that the proceeds of the taxes should be applied to roads only, and that the balance (if any) in hand annually should fall into the Exchequer . . .". The Committee felt unable to deal with the point of principle involved, and left it to the Cabinet.⁵

It was discussed at a meeting of Ministers a couple of days later. Lloyd George was in the chair, and others present included Chamberlain, Geddes, Bonar Law, Baldwin and Maybury. Geddes had by now been advised by his chief solicitor that to let the Treasury take over the balance would have the same effect "as regards the pledges which you have given" as would the Unemployment Committee's proposals. But although objections were raised ("that this proposal would establish the principle of a private purse owned by government departments which would not be liable to be called on to meet the general needs of the nation") they were decisively silenced by Chamberlain himself:

The Conference was . . . informed that the question of principle had been settled in 1909 and that, in the opinion of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, it was not possible to administer the Road Fund efficiently unless the proceeds of the motor vehicle taxes were allowed to accumulate in the hands of the Ministry of Transport, who would then be able to elaborate schemes which would operate for several years at a time.⁶

With the Road Fund firmly written into the Bill, the Transport spokesmen in Parliament did their best to nail it to the mast. Geddes traced the development of motor-tax revenue from £700,000 per year in 1909 to £8 million under the present arrangements, provided, as he added, "by the motoring community by an extraordinary example of voluntary taxation". This was effusive enough; but Neal, winding up the debate, went further, in words which have been used ever since as weapons in the debate about motor taxation:

The motorists have consented to raise money by this particular tax, on the definite understanding that the money shall be expended in the improvement of roads. . . . Therefore this fund, especially raised by taxation of a particular class, is specially safeguarded for the use for which it is raised.⁷

It was quite consistent with this to argue that if the tax raised more money than was immediately needed for the roads, it should be reduced. The motorists did so. When the MLC deputation came to see Geddes in May 1921, they suggested that if the revenue rose above the £9 million budgeted for, the Ministry should consider reducing the tax by a quarter in the next Budget.

Geddes, though doubting that the tax was responsible for the industry's troubles, was impressed by the case for reducing it. He made a half-promise: "If later on we find that the estimate, which is coming out very fairly, does or begins to increase, and the sum of money is getting larger, I hope that my successor in office will be able to make reductions for you. . . . I certainly hope your taxation will fall".⁸

The motorists took this up eagerly. Three weeks later the MLC sent Geddes, under cover of a letter referring to his 'assurances' about the possibility of reducing taxation, a draft clause for insertion in the current Finance Bill, empowering the Minister of Transport to reduce tax levels if a surplus seemed likely.⁹

When asked by the Treasury to provide a brief for the Chancellor (now Sir Robert Horne)* in replying to the MLC amendment, the Ministry of Transport agreed that there was something in the MLC's point. ". . . The motorist of one year may not unreasonably demur to being over-taxed, even if the motorist of the next year but one is likely to enjoy a lower rate of taxation. . . ." ¹⁰

This went a lot further than the Treasury wished. For public purposes they commented simply, in a note drafted by Niemeyer, that the MLC amendment was unacceptable both because it would allow tax rates to "be reduced by administrative action in the interests of a powerful section of taxpayers without the full authority of Parliament", and because it was dangerous to relate too closely the produce of the tax in one year to the expenditure to be met from it. Privately, Niemeyer was blunter. In the minute which he sent to the Chancellor with his note, he commented that Geddes was 'obviously sympathetic' to the MLC case, and went on:

On this point the interests of the Treasury are somewhat divergent from those of the Ministry of Transport. The Ministry of Transport

* When Bonar Law resigned from the leadership of the Conservative party for health reasons in March 1921, Chamberlain had succeeded him and had become Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons.

are only concerned with the Road Fund, and regard themselves naturally as the champions of the motorists, and their Committee was and is a motorists' committee. . . .

Niemeyer admitted that the 'theory' that the motorists were entitled to the whole of the proceeds of motor taxation had been accepted by Chamberlain and that there would probably be 'a great outcry' if the Treasury now went back on it. But, he added,

the great change in the financial position since last year will involve the reconsideration of many pledges, and the question may well arise not whether the state is entitled to raise eight or nine millions per annum by taxation on motors, but whether, if it does so, it must spend that sum on roads. . . . The Chancellor will probably not wish to raise this controversy at the present moment, but at the same time he may think it well to give no further encouragement to the theory that motor taxes must be spent on roads and to keep as free a hand in this respect for the future as he can. The pledge suggested in the Ministry's Finance Bill note might be very awkward, and the Chancellor (if he doesn't speak himself) may like to warn the Minister off it.¹¹

Horne accepted this advice. His private secretary told Neal's that Horne was 'most anxious' that Neal should say nothing in the Finance Bill debates to imply that good results from motor taxation might result in lower taxes. Neal, taken aback, raised the matter himself with the Financial Secretary, Hilton Young. Young confirmed the message. Neal was horrified; as he told Geddes, "this was absolutely contrary to the pledges given by you, and supported by me, and I thought you would probably wish to write to the Chancellor upon the subject".¹²

Geddes' reaction was much the same. He wrote at once to Horne, without even consulting Maybury, in strong terms:

I would like – in view of my own early departure from the government – to place on record my view that any diversion of the proceeds of this tax . . . would be a most flagrant breach of an honourable obligation and definite pledges. Were such a course to be pursued when I was in the government, it would make it absolutely incumbent upon me to resign, and Neal feels exactly the same thing. . . . [Geddes went on to recall the agreement between himself and Chamberlain.] It was on that understanding, and that understanding alone, that the motoring community agreed to the tax and it was carried with preponderating support from the motoring world. Any

suggestion that agreement should now be cancelled . . . would . . . be a complete breach of faith, and apart from that would raise a storm, among a very active and numerous section of the community, which would cause very considerable trouble. You will also have every local authority against you – it is their relief.

Geddes concluded that the government were “committed absolutely up to the hilt” to the bargain with the motorists. He begged that if the Treasury disagreed with his assessment, Horne would at least discuss the matter with him.¹³

Horne’s reply managed to give the impression both of promising that the bargain should be honoured and of threatening that it might not be. He quite agreed, he said, that to divert motor tax revenue would mean going back on a pledge:

I do not suggest that this should be done: all that I am anxious for is that special emphasis should not be laid upon such a pledge at the present time. The financial future is so uncertain that it is impossible to say that no changes shall *ever* take place in the destination of the proceeds of motor taxation. If the need arises, some Chancellor of the Exchequer may some day be compelled to use some of the revenue from motor taxes for general purposes, and all that I ask now is that we should not commit ourselves further to pledges which circumstances *may* make it impossible to keep for ever.¹⁴

Geddes appears to have been appeased by this reply. Meanwhile, the motorists, unaware of these discussions, were increasingly demanding the concessions which they saw as an integral part of the bargain. It had become clear that with the swelling numbers of motor vehicles the tax revenue would comfortably exceed the £9 million needed for roads. The *Autocar* suggested that motorists should now press for a reduction of 25 per cent in tax rates.¹⁵

The AA’s main concern was to get back to the petrol tax and the relatively light tax burden on private cars which went with it; the following spring they were still lobbying private motorists, arguing that the horsepower tax was based on ownership, not use – with the result that “the greatest users of the road pay the least tax per mile”: a direct attack on the commercial interests.¹⁶

The Ministry of Transport continued to fight for the Road Fund. In the winter of 1921/2 they told the Geddes Committee* that motor

* Geddes had left the Ministry of Transport to become chairman of this committee, set up in August 1921 to investigate the scope for economies in public expenditure.

taxation was inherently different from 'ordinary taxes'. These, it was claimed, were imposed "to enable the state to discharge responsibilities it has directly assumed on behalf of the community". But motor taxes were imposed "with the direct object of avoiding a responsibility". Once the principle was abandoned that the motorists should pay for the roads and for the roads alone, the state would have accepted a liability for roads.¹⁷

In a rather different context – arguing the case for preserving Roads Department – the Ministry of Transport described to the Geddes Committee the political problems which they saw looming in their relationship with road-users. "A natural antagonism is growing between the users of commercial, of passenger carrying, and of private cars as to the proportionate burden which should fall on each section. . . . Directly any attempt has been made to revise the Schedule [to the Finance Act, 1920], certain motoring interests are sure to attempt once more an organised attack on the general scheme for taxation. The position will require careful handling both in Parliament and outside and will certainly engage a considerable amount of the personal time and attention of the Parliamentary head of the department."¹⁸

The Geddes Committee were not convinced of the need for a separate Ministry of Transport at all, and proposed that it should be wound up and its responsibilities transferred to the Board of Trade. Geddes himself, as having been personally involved, took no part in the discussions of the future of the Road Fund. But his committee concluded with a formal endorsement of the Transport line. They noted without further comment that "the assignment to road purposes of the proceeds of motor taxes was in the nature of a bargain with motor-users, and while the bargain stands we do not feel we can make any recommendation".¹⁹

The situation thus remained unchanged. The motorists continued to demand that the whole tax system be reviewed, with the aim of getting back to the petrol tax in 1924 and, at the very least, reducing vehicle tax in 1923. The Ministry of Transport, possibly encouraged by Geddes' conclusions, continued to assure the motorists that they saw the force of their case and would seriously consider what might be done. The Treasury, meanwhile, continued to revolve the possibility of getting at the Road Fund. In 1922 they submitted a memorandum to a Cabinet committee, recalling Geddes' conclusions, conceding that there had indeed been a 'bargain' made in 1920, but

expressing alarm at the way in which the Ministry of Transport – “possibly with the idea of warding off an attack by us on the Fund” – were mortgaging all the growing surplus from motor taxation on ‘grandiose’ schemes of road construction which did very little to relieve unemployment.* They proposed that the Exchequer be allowed to take all the proceeds of motor taxation exceeding £9 million.²⁰

The proposal was rejected. But it was, for the Treasury, only a tactical defeat. They had from the beginning been extremely cautious about allowing their intentions to become public, or known even to the Ministry of Transport, and there are no signs that Transport were ever aware of this latest proposal. This caution continued. In August 1922 Maybury had once again made play with the ‘bargain’, in giving evidence to the Committee on Exchequer Grants; when asked for documentary evidence, he had referred to the correspondence between Geddes and Chamberlain in 1920. The chairman asked if he could see this correspondence. The Treasury reaction was defensive. Grigg, Churchill’s private secretary,† minuted Niemeyer: “The correspondence of 1920 clearly cannot be published, particularly in view of the later correspondence of 1921”²¹ (which had hinted that although to renounce the bargain might be unthinkable, it was nonetheless not impossible).

At the beginning of 1923, the Treasury brought their arguments out into the open. A memorandum circulated to the Cabinet began: “It appears to the Treasury that the time has come when it is desirable to hold an enquiry to determine what should be the national policy in regard to the finance of road expenditure and motor car taxation. . . .” They then tried to undermine the notion of the assigned Road Fund by ridicule, outlining the ludicrous situation which would be created if the principle were extended to other sectors, and the proceeds of other taxes devoted exclusively to meeting an appropriate block of expenditure – “e.g. the taxes on drink, liquor licences, etc., to bear the charges for police, prisons, and the administration of justice: the income tax the cost of defence: the death duties the debt charges, and so forth – it is easy to imagine the confusion

* Under these schemes, £2.8 million was paid out of the Road Fund in 1920-1, £4 million in 1921-2, £5.2 million in 1922-3.

† P. J. Grigg (1890-1966): principal private secretary to successive Chancellors of the Exchequer, 1921-30; chairman, Board of Inland Revenue, 1931-3; Finance Member, government of India, 1934-9; Permanent Secretary, War Office, 1939-42; Secretary of State for War, 1942-5. Knighted, 1932.

that would result. . . . Some of the services charged on the funds would languish for insufficient funds, some would run riot with excessive sums at their disposal. In short before long the whole system would be reduced to chaos. . . ."

The Treasury went on to dismiss as "a preposterous claim" the suggestion that government had ever made a bargain with the motorists, or that "any set of taxpayers are entitled to make binding terms with Parliament as to the application of the taxes levied from them. The bargain, such as it was, was made during another Parliament and with another government; and there can be no question that Parliament has full power to alter the rates of motor taxation and the application of the proceeds without the consent of the motor users."

The memorandum added that the way in which the Road Fund was being used in itself cast doubt on the wisdom of giving sole charge of it to the Ministry of Transport. Not only was the Fund's annual income much larger than had earlier been expected, but its managers entered into vast commitments which entailed either forestalling the Fund's future revenue or borrowing on the security of it. The Fund thus became a borrower and a burden. The Treasury proposed, as a step towards ending this state of affairs, that a Cabinet committee should look into the possibility of limiting the Fund's annual income to, say, £10 million, and transferring any surplus direct to the Exchequer.²²

The main discussion of this proposal naturally centred on questions of employment. The Ministry of Labour did not object on principle, but suggested that an enquiry be postponed till the employment situation was more nearly normal.²³ The Ministry of Transport attacked on several fronts. Ashley indignantly asserted that his road work schemes had been put forward for the sole purpose of relieving unemployment. His department had not asked the Exchequer for help, in order to help the Chancellor—not because they wanted to be free to commit the Road Fund to unnecessary schemes in order to satisfy 'road enthusiasts', "and I regret that any such suggestions should have been imported into the discussion". Ashley ended by pointing out the political objections to the Treasury proposal, which would arouse the united opposition of all the motoring interests and the highway authorities.²⁴

The Treasury came back with proposals for soothing the rural authorities by giving them a larger share of road grants. The

Ministry of Labour raised further objections. In the event the Cabinet agreed that the time for raising the fundamental questions about motor taxation and roads finance had not yet come. Nonetheless, this was without prejudice to the possibility of holding an enquiry later on, in more favourable circumstances.²⁵

Ashley was quite justified in insisting that his department was not a mere tool of the 'roads enthusiasts'. The Ministry of Transport's own enthusiasm for roads was tempered by some very strict views about how road-building should be financed. Strongly influenced by Maybury, they had been taking an extremely tough line with the several proposals which had been put forward by private consortia for building special motorways from London to be run as profit-making concerns, financed by tolls. A proposal in 1923 to build such a road from Uxbridge to Liverpool was rejected by an inter-departmental committee chaired by Maybury, who also in his own name submitted to the committee evidence showing that the promoters had greatly underestimated the capital and maintenance costs of the road and just as greatly overestimated the volume of traffic it would attract. A similar proposal was put forward the next year. Maybury again demolished the promoters' case. He objected to toll-roads on principle ("bearing in mind the objections to the old turn-pikes and the efforts that were made . . . to get rid of them"); to "the placing of very important road traffic arteries in the hands of private capitalist enterprise, to be operated for profit"; and to the encouragement that building new roads would give to local authorities to neglect their own old ones ("I am not surprised that considerable support for the construction of these private motorways is given by local authorities . . ."). The Treasury also objected, fearing that the users of toll-roads would press either for motor-tax reductions or for operating subsidies.

It is impossible not to feel that the Ministry of Transport protested too much. They – that is, Maybury – objected variously to the idea of letting private enterprise make profits out of motorways and to the certainty that there would be no demand from road-users and that the motorways would thus make a loss. The rationale for Maybury's opposition seems never to have been clearly spelled out within the Ministry; but obviously, as the outstanding figure in national highway policy, a former local authority employee whose influence and reputation – as the Ministry had told the Geddes Committee – was based on his special relationship with highway

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authorities, he would have much to lose from a successful invasion of the field by private enterprise. All that seems to have been made clear to his colleagues was that motorways, for whatever reasons, were not acceptable. When the Home Office asked Roads Department for their comments on the 1923 proposal, Godsell wrote back with evident uncertainty: "I think the position is that we are opposed to special motorways as such, though we have not been anxious to be very articulate upon the subject. . . ." ²⁶

* * * * *

With the return of the Conservatives in 1924 the Treasury turned briefly from their attacks on the Road Fund to the necessary task of restoring the McKenna duties. Officials tried to show, for the benefit of the Chancellor, Churchill, that the removal of the duties had led to an increase in imports and thus to higher unemployment in the trades affected.²⁷ This was not easy to do. It was simple to show a rising trend in imports of cars*; unfortunately the last six months showed an even more steady fall in unemployment in the motor industry. The Board of Trade, forwarding these figures to the Treasury, did their best, commenting that the detrimental effects of increased imports were concealed by the need of a mass-production industry to keep lines rolling and thus to maintain their labour forces despite short-term fluctuations. "Men are dismissed only when time has proved that 'standing off' is a necessity."

Churchill, too, did his best. He noted:

It seems to be established . . . that these imports have detrimentally affected employment in all the industries concerned. This detrimental effect is masked in the case of motor cars by the fact that a great expansion is going forward in the use of motor cars, whether British or foreign. . . . Pray check these conclusions for me, and marshal any figures sustaining them.

All that can be said for the brief which the Board of Trade finally produced is that it was no worse than the arguments with which they had, a year earlier, justified the removal of the duties. It was known, they said, that in recent months many British cars had been selling badly; no precise information was available for imported

* The monthly average had fallen from 1,369 in 1923 to 983 in the first half of 1924, but had risen sharply to 1,605 between August 1924 and February 1925.

cars, but they seemed to have been selling well. The prices of many of the smaller British cars had been reduced; although the press had welcomed this, "the trade concerned, it is safe to say, are inclined to regard it as an index of distress".

It is easy to sympathise with the Board of Trade. It was true that in 1925 private car imports rose to their highest level between the wars: nearly 32,000 compared with only 10,000 in the two years on either side. But in the same year the number of cars on the roads increased by 106,000, more than in any year since the war. With over half a million cars in use, the British market seemed capable of comfortably absorbing a few thousand more imports. Churchill seems to have admitted something of the sort. When he came to make his Financial Statement in April, his arguments for reimposing the duties were not in terms of employment at all. He went back to McKenna's words of 1915: cars (and other goods) had been chosen because their consumption was undesirable, because keeping them out would help the balance of payments and because a tax on them would produce some revenue. To some people, Churchill added, the duties were a relish, to others a target, to himself a revenue. But he allowed himself an element of relish, with a peroration couched in terms which were to become familiar in his assaults on the Road Fund. The duties might be temporary:

There may come another Chancellor of the Exchequer, in times when revenue is more abundant and when expenditure is less exacting, who may be able, once again, to roll away this hideous cloud of oppression and wealthy and patriotic persons will once again be able to recreate their exhausted strength in untaxed foreign motor cars. . . .²⁸

But the McKenna duties were a mere *hors d'œuvre*. The Treasury's plans for taking over part of the Road Fund were now going steadily forward. In April, 1925, Ashley proposed to make various small changes in taxation rates. Niemeyer advised Churchill that these proposals should be accepted – not on grounds of their merits, but because "if we are going to make a frontal attack on the Road Fund next year, it will be better to have got these small changes . . . out of the way". This argument did not appeal to Churchill, for reasons which he was to elaborate later in the Road Fund battle. He noted: "These proposals are very tardy. They look like tinkering, and

large questions are opened and not settled on any comprehensive scheme. I will either deal with the problem properly, or leave it alone.”²⁹

After further discussion it was decided to postpone the suggested changes at least beyond the impending Budget. But the Treasury continued to reflect on the ‘large questions’, and in August 1925 Churchill flew a preliminary but significant kite when he told the House of Commons that the government were considering lending some of the Road Fund surplus to help finance electricity development schemes and that they had yet to decide whether the whole of the rapidly expanding income from motor taxation should be spent on roads, “irrespective of the comparative needs of this and other services, or the general financial position of the country”.³⁰

It was a complex decision. It was not a question simply of raising money, but of regulating the competition between road transport and the ailing railways. The commercial road interests were to complain throughout the coming years that the government was deliberately driving traffic back on to the railways. Although this was never publicly accepted as a policy aim, it was in fact fundamental to motor-taxation policy throughout this period. Hurst * minuted in October 1925 that competition between road and rail could be made ‘fair’ only by subsidising railways or by increasing the taxation on roads. “The former is clearly out of the question; and therefore, the taxation on motor traffic must be increased.”³¹

It might have been thought that having discussed the problem in private and in public for over five years, the Treasury would by now have settled, to its own satisfaction, on the decisive arguments for a raid on the Road Fund. The arguments against hypothecating revenue had been deployed, with ever-increasing sophistication, by Treasury officials ever since Lloyd George first introduced the scheme. It suggests how seriously Treasury officials and Ministers treated abandoning the ‘bargain’, despite the scorn with which they greeted every mention of it, that in fact the case for abandoning it is rehearsed, elaborated, modified, on Treasury files until well into the 1930s. This might be taken as decisive evidence of the influence of the motorists, and as justifying the statement made by the *Motor* in late 1925 that motorists were now “by no means inconsiderable or

* A. W. Hurst (b. 1884). Treasury, 1907–32; Import Duties Advisory Committee 1932–40; Mines Department, 1940–2; War Cabinet Secretariat, 1942–4. KBE, 1929.

unimportant. . . . It is unthinkable that they can be expected to tolerate the betrayal that is now threatened. . . ."³² In fact, it is clear that the Treasury saw the main political obstacle to a raid as not the motorists, but the local authorities, especially in the rural areas. In later 1925 many resolutions were passed by local authorities and local authority associations, protesting against a possible raid on the Fund.³³ Their mood is illustrated by a letter which Ashley received from a Tory country member. In a classic statement of the apprehension of the back-bencher at his leaders' activities, Hugh Morrison wrote:

As a member representing an agricultural seat, I view with great alarm the rumoured intention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to raid the Road Fund, in view of the fact that for some years to come there is likely to be an increasing charge for the maintenance and upkeep of the roads. If the Road Fund is raided it will mean increased burdens on the already over-burdened ratepayers. It seems to me that at the present time the government is doing its best to alienate our leading supporters in the counties.³⁴

At about the same time Hurst was minuting Barstow:

The transference of the whole proceeds of the motor taxes to the Exchequer would certainly provoke the strongest possible hostility, not only from all the motor interests, both manufacturers and users . . . but from local authorities and rural MPs. If we are to make a successful raid on the Road Fund I believe it is essential to buy over the support of the local authorities.³⁵

A more sophisticated version of this strategy was suggested by one of Churchill's private secretaries, Fergusson.* He proposed to abolish the Road Fund altogether and to pay all future motor-tax revenues into the Exchequer, basing the tax system partly on the amount of damage done to the roads by each class of vehicle and partly on the notion that private cars were a luxury. The combined road and luxury tax would be so graduated that smaller cars would pay slightly less than at present, while the more expensive cars paid more. A large proportion of the revenue would be given in block grants to local authorities, whose real need was for money to help

* Sir J. Donald Fergusson (1891-1963): private secretary to successive Chancellors of the Exchequer, 1920-36. Later Permanent Secretary to Ministries of Agriculture and Fisheries, Fuel and Power. "One of the great civil service administrators thrown up by the [1939-45] war" (*The Times*).

them pay for repairing existing roads – not for the extravagant schemes forced on them by Maybury's Roads Department. Fergusson argued that his scheme would be supported by the many motorists who owned small cars, by the manufacturers of small cars, and by local authorities. It would be opposed only by the owners and makers of heavy commercial vehicles, charabancs and buses, and expensive private cars, and Maybury and his fellow road enthusiasts. Moreover, all this would "provide a first-rate diversion of interest from the major issue of securing the accumulated balance".³⁶

Fergusson was right in assuming that not all the motorists were agreed. The head of Morris's public relations department sent to the Treasury, a little later, a cutting of some very moderate remarks in the Morris house journal about the possibility of a raid on the Road Fund, and pointed out that Morris, at least, was not "always ready to follow the lead given by the more sensational sections of the press".³⁷ A few weeks later, Stanley, the chairman of the RAC, told a London newspaper that the pledge given to the motor industry when the Fund was set up could not be regarded as binding for ever (on which the editor of the *Motor* commented: "Save us from our friends!").³⁸ *

A hint that isolating the motorists and road enthusiasts from the local authorities might be the right tactic was provided in a letter sent to Churchill's private secretary, Grigg, by another rural MP. This suggested that the average Member would not object to seeing the Road Fund brought under the Treasury. Country MPs wanted money for local thoroughfares, not for Maybury's arterial roads. If the Chancellor could give a firm guarantee that rural roads would get their full share, while 'fancy schemes' would be cut back, "the Chancellor can have the rest for tax reduction and I will eat my hat if the Conservative Agricultural Committee does not back this".⁴⁰

If the Treasury officials did not see the motorists as the main danger, this was at least partly because they hoped that not all motorists would oppose whatever changes were made. That they might have backed down before the united motorists is suggested by their reactions to a scheme which Churchill tried to push on them

* Stanley (who had himself been a Conservative MP) saw moderation as the only practicable approach. In September, asking Ashley for an urgent interview, he explained: "The bombshell thrown by Winston has fluttered the motoring doves, but unfortunately the doves are all rather inclined to fly in opposite directions, and if we don't take care the doves will end by looking like asses."³⁹

in the spring of 1926: to increase the driving licence fee so as to yield "an appreciable revenue". Hurst objected that to add this increase to the other changes they had in mind would jeopardise the whole scheme, and went on to argue the general case against it in both logical and political terms. It would have to be defended by reference either to wear and tear or to luxury. On the first count, it was not self-evident that a family car was used more merely because each member of the family held a licence, and any case based on this hypothesis was vitiated by the existence of the professional chauffeur. As for luxury, once again, the most luxurious cars were driven by chauffeurs. "And, after all what is the luxury element of a car? It is essentially that of owning and travelling in one, rather than that of driving. We tax dogs, presumably as a luxury; are we to tax every member of the family who takes pleasure in having the dog?"

Hurst added that an increase in the licence fee would affect the poorer car-owners, hard hit by existing taxation and so far more or less exempt from the new proposals. It would probably "raise a storm out of all proportion to the revenue we are likely to obtain from it, and suffice to combine against us in one solid phalanx the whole of the motoring community from the cycle to the lorry".⁴¹

Over the next two years repeated suggestions from the industry for an increase in the fee were passed on to Churchill by Lord Curzon MP (who added for himself that an increase might help to keep the "more inefficient and inexperienced people off the roads").⁴² But the Treasury's view remained unchanged.

In general, the Treasury tried to disarm the opposition to their proposals by demonstrating that these were morally and economically justifiable. They did their best to show that most motor vehicles were private motor cars – and, as such, luxury transport for which there was no case, in a time of economic crisis, for building elaborate tracks.* An internal minute of October 1925 argued the case for a raid from first principles. It was surely not possible, wrote the Controller of Supply Services, Sir George Barstow,† with well-calculated indignation, to maintain that the action of the government, three Parliaments ago, estopped all governments for all time

* In August 1925 a million and a half motor vehicles were in use. Cars, motor cycles, and commercial vehicles of all kinds each made up about a third of this total.

† Sir George Barstow (1874-1965). Treasury, 1898-1927; government director, Anglo-Iranian Oil Co., 1927-46; chairman, Prudential Assurance Co., 1941-53. KCB, 1920.

from imposing taxation on the owners of motor cars for purposes other than paying for roads and bridges. Motor taxation was in no sense voluntary. It was imposed by statute; and what Parliament had done, Barstow added with undeniable constitutional correctness, Parliament could undo. Many comments had been made, he went on, "on the extravagance of providing extremely wide roads, with wonderful surfaces, which encourage motoring at high speeds, at a time when strict economy is enjoined on all other Departments of state, and important social services may have to be curtailed".⁴³ Churchill chided a Tory MP who had written threatening to vote against the Finance Bill if the Road Fund were raided, and asked him: "Would you, for instance, propose to build joy roads to Brighton or Ascot at a time when you could not afford to build cruisers?"⁴⁴ *

For the next few months the Treasury was to be preoccupied with several themes: assembling the most convincing general arguments against the inviolability of the Road Fund as a whole; working out principles on which luxury and wear-and-tear taxation could be convincingly based; and attempting to satisfy as many as possible of the likely objectors to what was, however it was dressed up, no more and no less than the repudiation of an agreement. Their aim was to show that the agreement was invalid and that too much was being spent on roads. In a vigorous minute to his officials in November 1925, Churchill tried to lay the foundation for both parts of this case:

We must really go into the question of pledges. Let me have them looked up. There can be no question of the power of Parliament to sweep away the whole system of taxation and reimpose entirely new taxation. . . . Whoever said that motorists were to contribute nothing for all time to the general revenue of the country, or that, however great their luxury and wealth, or the inroads they make on the convenience of pedestrians, they were to be exempt for all time through their character of motorists from the smallest contribution to our revenue? Entertainments may be taxed; public houses may be taxed; racehorses may be taxed; the possession of armorial bearings and manservants may be taxed – and the yield devoted to the general revenue. But motorists are to be privileged for all time to have the whole yield of the tax on motors devoted to roads. Obviously this is all nonsense. Whoever said that, whatever the yield of these taxes, and whatever the poverty of the country, we were to build

* Earlier in the year Churchill had had an intense struggle with the Admiralty over the size of the Naval Estimates and of the cruiser programme in particular.

roads, and nothing but roads, from this yield? We might have to cripple our Trade by increased taxation of income, we might even be unable to pay for the upkeep of our Fleet. But never mind, whatever happens, the whole yield of the taxes on motors must be spent on roads! . . . Such contentions are absurd, and constitute at once an outrage upon the sovereignty of Parliament and upon common sense.⁴⁵

But even before settling on the arguments which would justify a raid, another question of policy had to be answered. Should the raid be a once-for-all affair, to help balance the Budget for 1926-7, or merely the first instalment of some permanent arrangement? Barstow put these as alternatives to Churchill in the autumn of 1925, suggesting that in any long-term arrangement it might be prudent for the Exchequer to take over all revenue from motor licences, but to pay some or all of it back in block grants to local authorities to supplement existing grants for services such as health, education and police.⁴⁶

Churchill was attracted by Barstow's proposal. But, he added, they must not fall back on a raid as the solution until every other saving possible had been agreed upon. "It is too easy a way out. We must get the hard work done first; and it is only when we have succeeded in making substantial real economies to ease our position in 1927-8 that we shall be justified . . . in utilising the Road Fund."⁴⁷ Three weeks later this ringing principle had been somewhat modified. Churchill suggested that all motor taxation should be paid into the Exchequer and brought under Treasury and Parliamentary control. It should be based on two principles: wear and tear of the roads and 'luxurious locomotion'. The consequences of these principles were those Fergusson had proposed: increased taxation on heavy vehicles, a luxury tax on the more expensive cars, and a relief for the lighter and cheaper cars.⁴⁸

A few weeks later Churchill revealed his plans to his colleagues. The Cabinet Standing Committee on National Expenditure had been set up the previous April to examine ways "of making a substantial reduction of the charges on the taxpayer". Its members had already received a pre-emptive memorandum from Joynson-Hicks, now in the Cabinet as Home Secretary, and thus at last with access – presumably by courtesy of Ashley – to such documents as supported the motorists' case. He had argued that, having seen the correspondence of 1920 between Geddes and Chamberlain, he did not see

"how the government could avoid a charge of flagrant breach of faith if any part of the Road Fund were now to be diverted to other purposes". He went on, in terms which he had often used from the back benches, to claim that there could be no justification for taxing cars as luxuries: "the vast majority of car owners are persons of small or at any rate moderate means". He concluded that "the united opposition of the local authorities and the motoring community would constitute a most formidable and indeed overwhelming force".⁴⁹

Churchill's account of his proposals began with the usual ridicule for the motorists' claim that they were 'voluntary tax payers', whose tax revenue could not be diverted without a breach of faith. "It will be only a step from this for them to claim in a few years the moral ownership of the roads their contributions have created." To this he added the notion of motor vehicles as wanton luxuries. The public saw industry labouring under a burden of taxation, and at the same time immense expenditure on wide roads with wonderful surfaces, "over which large cars career at excessive speeds". He did not pause to explain why it might be preferable for such roads to be used by small slow vehicles, but went on to outline a scheme for the total liquidation of the Road Fund. This, which he had not himself supported within the Treasury, seems to have been a tactical proposal designed to emphasise the relative mildness of his alternative scheme. This was based on the principles of wear and tear and luxury; the luxury component of the tax was to go direct to the Exchequer, while the wear-and-tear element should go, via the Road Fund, to local authorities. The consequent increase in tax levels was justified not merely by the economic condition of the country, but also by the difficulties which under-taxed road transport was causing the railways. The final proposals to which all these arguments led up was that 20 per cent of existing taxation on private cars and motor cycles should be treated as luxury taxation and paid into the Exchequer; this would produce about £2 million in 1926-7. The few grants now being made for road work as a means of relieving unemployment should be a charge on the Road Fund. And – a new inspiration – the Road Fund should pay back to the Exchequer the £8 millions which it had received as a grant in 1919 to make up for the neglect of wartime.⁵⁰

The Ministry of Transport's views were put to the Committee before they had seen Churchill's proposals. Ashley suggested that

to abolish the Road Fund would be "administratively a retrograde and politically a disastrous step". As it stood, "the justice of the arrangement is so obvious that motorists find the money without serious complaint. If they were singled out for taxation on any ground but that of road use they would unite in a formidable and permanent agitation." Ashley went on to suggest that an attack on the Fund would be resisted by the users of every kind of motor vehicle, by the local authorities, by the rural members of the Unionist Agricultural Committee, and by the Labour party (who would lead the cry, "If you nationalise the income, nationalise the service"). The only savings that Ashley could suggest would be on new construction: up to £ $\frac{3}{4}$ million a year for five years.⁵¹

When the Ministry of Transport saw Churchill's proposals, Ashley at once circulated a reply, attacking the notion that the roads were used only by rich pleasure motorists, accepting that it might be possible to require heavy vehicles to pay more to compensate rate-payers for the damage caused to roads, but concluding that while Churchill's first scheme was impossible, this did not make his second scheme "either desirable or defensible".⁵²

When the Committee, with Baldwin in the chair, discussed the subject, the first Treasury scheme found no favour. The second was accepted, after a warning from the Minister of Agriculture that it was politically essential to do something more for the rural highway authorities, and a half-promise from Churchill that if a workable petrol tax could be devised it might even be possible to reduce licence rates. The Committee left it to the Treasury, plus the Ministries of Transport and Agriculture and any others interested, to draw up a detailed scheme.⁵³

Churchill had already been in contact with the rural interests and had dealt firmly with their complaints. A deputation from the Unionist Agricultural Committee had called on him three weeks before; they had begged him not to increase the financial burdens on the county councils by abolishing the Road Fund, and had suggested that it might be politically unwise to do so - "do you not think that . . . you would at once have an uproar among the motor tax-payers?" Churchill referred scornfully to the objections raised to doing anything which might affect "this particular class, who have the great good fortune to rush about the country". The leader of the deputation, Sir H. Cautley, explained that he was concerned mainly to get at the rich motorists. Churchill, shrewdly anxious not

to seem to be in any way victimising motorists, pounced on this: "Let me say clearly, I have an expensive motor car, and use it a great deal, and I have nothing personal in my argument – I am speaking from a detached point of view, the public point of view." But he revealed nothing of his intentions. He deprecated the public discussion of an issue which had not been considered in the Cabinet, let alone in Parliament.⁵⁴

The rural authorities returned to the attack the following month, when Lord Derby brought a deputation to see Churchill. In defending their own interests, they were reduced to quoting at length the 'pledges' given to the motorists and to vigorously protesting that they were there to represent not the motoring interests, but those affected by road transport. They loudly applauded Churchill's statement that current taxation was far too easy on the heavy vehicles which did the most damage, and were assured by him that whatever happened to the Road Fund, local authorities would get no less than they had been getting in the past – indeed more would be available for maintenance and upkeep of rural roads than before.⁵⁵

Churchill took the chance to repeat this assurance the following month, when an anxious Derby wrote to him to explain that he had somehow, against his better judgement, been inveigled into taking the chair at a lunch to protest against encroachment on the Road Fund. He had no wish to protest, but wanted to be entirely clear on the assurance his deputation had been given the previous month: was it that Churchill would not reduce expenditure on repair and maintenance, or that he would actually increase it? Churchill told him that he had never promised not to reduce expenditure "on constructing these great new race tracks"; his promises related only to maintenance and upkeep.⁵⁶

Churchill might have felt that his plan for isolating the motorists by neutralising the local authorities was progressing well but for a letter which he received at the same moment from the Tory Whips' office, expressing anxiety at a motion which had been put down at the instigation of the backbench Agricultural Committee, resolving "that . . . the Road Fund should not be devoted to any purpose other than the maintenance, improvement or construction of roads and bridges". The Chairman of the Committee, Cautley, had told the Whips that they thought this the only way of impressing on the government the strength of their feelings on the subject. Churchill was asked to try to help placate them. He said that he felt he had

dealt with the local authorities in reassuring Derby, but wrote to Cautley adding to a flat refusal to reveal anything more about his proposals a promise not to reduce the maintenance grants made to local authorities, especially in rural areas.⁵⁷ A week later he felt confident enough to deal in debate very lightly with the unamended resolution moved by the Agricultural Committee, refusing to anticipate his Budget and suggesting that it was quite unconstitutional for the opponents of possible proposals to try to block them by passing hostile resolutions in advance.⁵⁸

The motorists themselves were by now extremely worried. Neal (who had left the government) had written to the *Motor* in February maintaining that the Fund was inviolable and protesting against Churchill's denial of "the old standing doctrine that a Parliamentary bargain is one to be kept".⁵⁹ Shortly afterwards a deputation representing twenty-one motoring organisations and kindred bodies called on Churchill. In a somewhat confused meeting some speakers dealt broadly with the principles of the Fund, while the SMMT argued that any cut in the roads programme would damage the motor industry by restricting its home market, thus increasing production costs and preventing any possible break-through in overseas markets. Churchill, in reply, as usual rebuffed the notion of pledges, pointed to apparent discrepancies in the views of the various members of the deputation, and added that the government, by restoring the McKenna duties, had shown themselves very mindful of the interests of the motor industry (for it would be "a lamentable and preposterous act of folly" to hinder the development of this wonderful new means of transport).⁶⁰

But the firmness with which Churchill now dealt with any mention of 'bargains' or 'pledges', put his several proposals to his colleagues, and reassured the rural authorities, concealed a complete lack of final agreement on details. Underlying this indecision was the problem of petrol tax. The tax was still open to all the objections that had been raised against it in the Departmental Committee. Nor was the answer to the problem of evasion simply to make all light oils dutiable; the political weakness of a duty of this kind was that it would fall on the rural voter who used paraffin for lighting and cooking. But it was the most attractive in theory. A workable tax would satisfy the private motorists and deal with the problem of relating taxation to road use. Lord Weir had put these arguments to Churchill the previous autumn. He argued that a petrol tax which

would make road use the basis of tax rates "would remove from the minds of motor owners the feeling of grave injustice which now exists as a result of the long delay in the readjustment of the present taxes and the non-fulfilment of the promises of former ministers".⁶¹

Churchill was impressed, and suggested that a departmental committee be set up to look into the problem. Opportunely, a few weeks later, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research sent the Treasury a note by Tizard* suggesting that, for other reasons, it might be worth having another look at the possibility of taxing imported petrol.

A committee was set up and, after working secretly for two months, produced two reports. The first concluded that the best solutions would be either a duty on all kinds of spirit, even though this would lead to protests from non-motoring users, or the abandonment of the idea of a petrol tax altogether. Their second report reinforced this view; they added that the case for a petrol duty seemed less strong than it had, since it had become plain that there would never be an adequate supply from home sources, and that the horsepower tax had not adversely affected engine design. Hamilton,† the chairman of Customs and Excise, sent this report to Churchill with a letter concluding rather lightly that he saw no way in which a fuel duty could form part of Churchill's plans and adding that he believed the Ministry of Transport had some alternative proposals for adjusting the scale of licence duties.⁶³

Churchill was far from impressed with this approach. He rebuked Hamilton, in terms which set out his, and the classical, view of the functions of a civil servant in relation to a Minister:

1. Do not mix up arguments about the desirability of a tax on motor spirit with the difficulties of evolving a practical scheme. You should assume at the present stage that the arguments in favour of the fuel duty are overwhelming and that your task is limited to producing three or four alternative methods of collecting the tax.

* Later permanent secretary, DSIR, the stepfather of radar and the rival of Lord Cherwell. He suggested that a petrol tax might encourage experiments in low-temperature carbonisation, increase the supply of home-produced light fuel oil (which came mainly from the Scottish shale oil industry), and would protect the coal industry.⁶²

† H. P. Hamilton (b. 1880). Inland Revenue, 1904-12; Treasury, 1912-18; Inland Revenue (Deputy-Chairman), 1918-19; Chairman, Board of Customs and Excise, 1919-27; Permanent Secretary Board of Trade, 1927-37; Scottish Office, 1937-46. KCB, 1921.

2. I therefore put aside what you write about [the objections to the tax].
3. I proclaim to you that a motor spirit tax, if it can be devised in a practical shape, is from every point of view desirable and in harmony with the largest and longest conception of the national interest. . . . I expect the Customs to produce various alternatives to surmounting the difficulties – great though they may be. . . . To every one of these alternatives there will no doubt be a serious objection. These objections will have to be balanced at a later stage against the value of the prize to be won. They must not be allowed to weaken the resolve to solve the problem. . . .⁶⁴

Churchill simultaneously set Treasury officials working in quite a different direction. The same day as his chiding minute to Hamilton, he had asked Barstow to approach the problem from the other end – i.e. to investigate ways of raising the largest possible sum from the Road Fund over time, by whatever means could be justified. He wrote:

Let me have, in the first instance, the argument which justifies our reclaim of £8 million from the surplus. I have not studied this transaction [although it had been agreed, some months before, by the National Expenditure Committee] with all the attention it deserves.

It may for instance alternatively be found better to leave the surplus intact and take a larger proportion of the future yield of the taxes to the Exchequer. . . . Pray outline me a plan to take, say, £2 or £3 million a year more for the Exchequer from the taxation of motors, or motor fuel, or all fuel, and use the whole of the surplus to fill the gap in the upkeep of roads during the next two or three years. Let us make quite sure of a permanent revenue birthright rather than a mess-of-pottage windfall, especially when we are not starving.⁶⁵

To this Barstow had replied that the only logic behind taking the £8 million had been the need to raise the largest possible sum without forcing the resignation of the Minister of Transport: "Necessity, the tyrant's plea, was perhaps the principal argument justifying the reclaim of £8 million. When we were considering the gloomy outlook for the Exchequer in 1926 the brilliant condition of the Road Fund could hardly escape notice." Barstow went on to say that the Minister of Transport would certainly have strongly resisted any suggestion of liquidating the Road Fund. So the proposal to take £8 million and 20 per cent of tax revenue was a simple com-

promise, "under which the Exchequer gets the money and a Cabinet division is avoided. All the same, it is difficult to present the receipt of the £8 million otherwise than as a 'raid on the Road Fund' as widely advertised." But, Barstow added, was it really worth completely replacing the horsepower tax by a petrol duty? All it would achieve would be to increase the revenue from heavy vehicles. Was not the answer to redistribute the burden of licence duties so as to get more from heavies, while adding a low petrol tax simply to see if it was workable? If it was, it could be increased in later Budgets.⁶⁶

Churchill did not answer until he had seen the scientific sub-committee's report, which produced two specifications covering motor fuel while excluding lamp oil. He then sent a minute to Hamilton, Barstow and Hurst, agreeing that the report showed it would be possible at least to impose a 'skeleton' duty as suggested by Barstow – perhaps 2d. a gallon. But this would reap all the disadvantages and none of the benefits: the oil companies would put up prices and blame it on the tax; the heavy vehicles, though threatened, would remain unscathed; too little revenue would be available to reduce licence duties; and the whole notion of a petrol tax would be discredited with nothing gained in return. The best answer might be to go for a complete switch to the petrol tax, with all its defects. Churchill, having lectured Hamilton on his role as a civil servant, now reciprocally acknowledged what he saw as his own responsibilities as a Minister:

I strongly incline to the belief that it would be wider, and in the end safer, to take the plunge. The systematic and general treatment of a great question often goes through where tentative tinkering and tampering fall short. I do not wish to press you beyond your better judgement; but if you say that you believe the proposal is practicable, as far as human foresight can go, I will take the responsibility of coming into action with it.⁶⁷

Treasury and Customs officials set to work on this basis. The following month they submitted a joint memorandum to the Cabinet.⁶⁸ This reflected the two main principles which the Cabinet had already agreed: that all classes of motor traffic should contribute to the Road Fund in proportion to the demands they made upon the roads, and that there should be a luxury tax on 'pleasure' cars and motor cycles. They went on to propose, in addition, a petrol tax of 8d. a gallon, commenting that despite all

the objections to the existing system of taxation there might not have been a case for replacing it but for the importance of encouraging the domestic production of liquid fuel from coal. They also suggested that the transfer of £8 million from the Road Fund could be justified by reference to the £8¼ million grant the Treasury had made to the Fund in 1919 and to the fact that in recent years the Treasury had not only not touched the Fund but had actually given additional subsidies to local authorities for road purposes.* They suggested, finally, that as well as declaring 20 per cent of existing taxation on private vehicles to be a 'luxury' tax, an additional tax should be imposed to raise about £1½ million a year in the form of an increased horsepower duty on the medium-sized and larger cars. They calculated that the effect of these changes would be to increase the share of total motor-tax revenue paid by commercial vehicles and hackneys (i.e. mainly buses) and to reduce that paid by private cars.

The political calculations of the Treasury by now displayed an almost obsessive sense of detail, as shown by a note by Hurst explaining the reasoning behind the new tax scale. At a meeting with the Ministry of Transport, it had been suggested that it would be simpler to delay the increase in luxury taxation until the petrol tax was introduced the following year. Hurst had replied that it would be politically desirable to do it at the same time as increasing the tax on heavy vehicles, to show that they were 'not the only sufferers'. But, he added, there were further political problems. A steadily rising scale would add so much to the tax burden of the standard Ford, already taxed very heavily, as to "give the impression that it was being especially singled out for attack". Equally, it would be politically undesirable to increase the tax paid by small cars (below about 16 horsepower) or to make the Rolls-Royce owner, at the top of the scale, pay more than about £80 a year. The answer was to leave the rate at £1 a horsepower up to 16 hp, to increase it to 30 shillings up to 24 hp, and to £2 thereafter.⁷⁰

These subtleties were, in the end, irrelevant. The prolonged

* In early April Churchill had again asked Hurst and Barstow to go into the background of the claim that the Treasury were entitled to reclaim £8 million from the Road Fund by virtue of their 1919 grant; it "must either be made thoroughly good or not used. Have you seen all the original papers about the post war grants? Let the files be collected and searched. . . . One must know what exactly took place and what were the reasons which actuated the Ministers concerned."⁶⁹

dispute in the coal industry, which was to be the trigger for the General Strike, was now heading towards crisis. The temporary subsidy given to the industry in July 1925 was due to expire on April 30, 1926. The findings of the Samuel Commission, which had reported in March, were congenial to neither miners nor employers, and the government's attempts to devise a political solution were proving ineffective. On April 15, Baldwin saw the Miners' Executive. The same day the Cabinet discussed Churchill's motor-tax proposals. The petrol tax and the extra luxury tax were rejected, the Cabinet concluding (in the words of the official minute):

that in view of the risk of a strike it was undesirable at the present juncture to run the risk of antagonising the interests primarily concerned in the proposed taxation, and that from this point of view, as well as from that of the amount of Parliamentary time that would be required for the passage of the proposed taxation, it was undesirable to include it in the coming budget.⁷¹

The raid was not vetoed, but, after all the Treasury's scheming in previous months, it was a relatively blunt affair. Introducing his Budget ten days later, Churchill announced that he proposed to take £7 million (not £8 million) from the Road Fund. One-third (not one-fifth) of the yield from private vehicles would be regarded as "attributable to the luxury or pleasure aspect of motoring" and transferred to the Exchequer – a modification which went some way towards securing the 'permanent revenue birthright' Churchill had hoped for. His explanation of these changes was aggressive and entirely unapologetic. He could not accept, he said, that motorists were in a different position from other citizens. Any question of contract in tax matters between the state and a body of citizens would be manifestly improper. Motor taxes were compulsory, like any other taxes, and could be varied as Parliament chose – no matter what was said, in quite different circumstances, by other Ministers or other governments.⁷² Only the rural interests were spared these stern words and actions. For them, Churchill had a judicious bribe: half a million pounds for grants towards 'unclassified' roads in country districts.

It made no difference what was said, in present circumstances, by anybody. Geddes as a party to the original 'pledge' had already anticipated its abandonment; in a speech given to the Commercial

Motor Users' Association ten days before the Budget he referred to the correspondence between Chamberlain and himself and added:

If ever there was a solemn bargain made by His Majesty's responsible Ministers that this taxation, if agreed to by those who were to pay it, should not be diverted to other purposes, that pledge was given in this case, and it appears to me inconceivable that this government should seek to break pledges given by a previous government of which so many of them were members.⁷³

But Churchill's attitude to the 'pledge' was shared even by the man supposed to have given it; Austen Chamberlain, replying to a proposal from Ashley that some sort of reply should be made to Geddes, suggested that he wait until after the Budget speech, and went on :

I have not had my papers searched, but I imagine that my copies of the correspondence, to which Geddes as it seems to me very unfortunately alluded, are probably in the Treasury files, but whatever the exact terms of his letter or mine, I certainly never imagined that such a statement could be construed by any sensible man as binding on Governments or Parliament with no regard to time or circumstances.⁷⁴

The Treasury gave nothing away. In fact there was no need to; despite the widespread objections to the raid, there was no effective resistance. The rural ratepayers were for the moment satisfied. The commercial interests were not greatly disturbed by the raid. The private motorists suffered from the now familiar split between the militant AA on one side, and the RAC and the manufacturers on the other.

The tolerant attitude of the RAC and SMMT (which they embodied in a public statement proclaiming it the duty of every responsible organisation to help the government in every way possible)⁷⁵ reflected not a change of heart on the subject of motor taxation, but a feeling of common interest in the face of a common enemy – organised labour. The General Strike had taken place in May; the coal strike was to last for a further six months. The General Strike in some ways marked road transport's coming-of-age. Commercial vehicles of all kinds took over from the railways, and for the first time London saw the spectacle of rush-hour congestion caused largely by motor traffic. Tom Jones, walking to Downing

Street on the morning of May 4, noted: "Long processions of every sort of vehicle conveying folk to their work. Transport now ought to be much easier than in previous stoppages owing to the immense increase in the number of motor vehicles of all sorts."⁷⁶

In the circumstances self-restraint was a realistic political tactic. It was not very successful. When the RAC and SMMT sent a deputation to Churchill before the committee stage of the Finance Bill in June, Grigg noted that their general line was that they did not wish to embarrass the government by questioning the principle of Churchill's proposals. They hoped only that, since they had helped the government to smash the General Strike, they would be allowed certain alterations of details (which would in fact eat up most of the increased revenue). Grigg suggested that "tomorrow you ought to temporise these people in order to avoid their working up an agitation in time for the committee stage of the Finance Bill". Churchill simply commented: "We could not give anything away; moreover, we are working under an agreed timetable."⁷⁷

The AA, characteristically, were not so willing to be moved. Supported by the *Motor*, they deplored the irresolution of the RAC and SMMT, the more so when Churchill took this chance to point out that the motorists were not united. He should not assume, the *Motor* threatened, that motorists acquiesced in the raid, and might well learn in time how bitter their resentment was.⁷⁸ But disunited they were; Shrapnell-Smith confessed himself unable to sympathise with the private motorists, who were only reaping the natural consequences of their long-standing complaint that they paid too much into the Road Fund. He noted with approval that it now seemed to be accepted that there was a fundamental difference between commercial and private vehicles, and that only the latter were liable to 'luxury' taxation. (The Treasury, in turn, noted Smith's remarks, and clipped them for their file.)⁷⁹

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Once the pattern was set, the way was clear for the government to continue, as need arose, to draw on the Road Fund and on the motorists as a source of revenue. The motorists, and some of the local authorities, continued to protest; in 1927 over 350,000 people signed a petition organised by the AA asking that motor-tax revenue be spent exclusively on roads, for a rebate in taxation if there were at any time a surplus in the Road Fund, and for the retention of

a Roads Department with a Parliamentary representative, whatever else might happen to other government departments in any rearrangement.⁸⁰

Churchill, meanwhile, was minuting his officials: "Please show me how I can obtain another £2 million per annum from the Road Fund", and had set up the scientific sub-committee of the Application Committee to think about a practicable petrol tax. Niemeyer proposed instead that the Exchequer should simply take £10 million of the Road Fund's estimated balance, at the end of the financial year, of £12 million. But he suggested that this raid "might appear less purely predatory" if it were combined with a proposal to bring the Road Fund under full Parliamentary control.⁸¹

In the event Churchill took the whole £12 million in his 1927 Budget. The justification offered was the same as before. The Treasury note on the relevant clause of the Finance Bill suggested that most criticisms of the raid came from the "enthusiastic supporters of road improvement", whose case was based on the value of roads to industry, but who failed to notice that much work was in fact being done on the roads which carried the heaviest weekend traffic. The note continued, in familiar vein: "At a time when the country is in considerable financial difficulties, it is clearly absurd that the State should be asked to provide large and ever-increasing sums for what are virtually pleasure racing tracks".⁸² *

The RIA tried to create opposition within the Conservative party; in June 1927 it circulated a memorandum to chairmen of constituency associations, arguing that the raid hit the property-owning Conservative supporters harder than the taxpaying supporters of other parties, as well as (in breaking the 'pledge') furnishing "the socialist party when in power with a precedent for their most extreme proposals".⁸⁴ The *Motor* protested that motor taxation had become "a form of super-tax imposed on a class", and threatened the government with the loss of the motorists' vote.⁸⁵

But to these and other of the usual protests the government gave

* Once again deliberate steps had been taken to placate the rural interests. In May Conservative Central Office forwarded to Churchill a resolution passed by the party's Agricultural Committee, asking for help for unclassified roads. Central Office advised that a promise of help might reduce dissatisfaction in the country districts. Churchill had in fact already promised the chairman of the committee to accept an appropriate amendment to the Finance Bill. He did so. In July the Committee sent him a resolution expressing "cordial appreciation" of this help.⁸³

only the usual replies. When in June a deputation from the manufacturers and users called on the Prime Minister, Churchill told them: "If I had not heard the excellent speech which Mr Shrapnell-Smith made today from his own lips, I think I could have repeated it by heart from my recollection of the other occasions when he and others I see here have visited me at the Treasury." They might have said the same to him, as he assured them that most traffic on the roads was pleasure traffic, and added that when it came to pleasure traffic "the motorists of every class, whether the owner of the Rolls-Royce or of the humble motor-bicycle, are among the most lucky and fortunate specimens of the many classes from which they spring".⁸⁶

IO

SOOTHING THE MOTORISTS

The 1929 General Election

The motorists' protests against the raids on the Road Fund had little effect on the Treasury's determination to give away nothing of substance. The Treasury were in fact working out ways of raising still more money from the motor vehicle. In January 1928 Churchill put to the Cabinet the proposal for a petrol tax which Customs had advised him against the previous spring.¹ The motorists were to have what they had long been asking for – but *in addition to* the existing vehicle tax. At 4d. a gallon, its basic purpose was to finance the elaborate scheme of industrial 'derating' being worked out jointly by Churchill and Neville Chamberlain at the Ministry of Health. Churchill told his colleagues that this tax – which "falls upon the buoyant pleasure motor vehicles of every class" – was so wide in scope and so low in incidence that it was unlikely to prove vexatious or injurious.

However, the motorists' arguments were picked up in a Cabinet paper circulated by the Colonial Secretary, Amery, the next month. Vehemently attacking any increase in motor taxation, and especially when it took this form, Amery argued:

The motor industry, whether concerned in the production of pleasure or industrial vehicles, of motor-driven trains or ships, or of airships and aeroplanes, is destined to be by far the most important skilled industry in the world in our generation, as well as the pre-dominant factor in defence.

The industry, he went on, was being denied the chance of breaking into export markets "by a system of taxation which practically prohibits the sale at home of the only type of car that is of any use in the rest of the Empire or [other foreign markets]". To *add* a petrol tax to the horsepower tax seemed to him "disastrous unwisdom"; the chance should be taken to end the present indefensible system.²

Amery's protests were ignored, and Churchill announced the tax

SOOTHING THE MOTORISTS

in his Financial Statement in April. The private motorists would naturally be disappointed, he acknowledged, that the only response to all their petitioning had been an additional tax. He could only appeal to their sense of duty:

I believe the motoring community, who are neither the least fortunate nor the least patriotic element in the nation, and who have been so greatly favoured by the downward movement of petrol prices, will not judge the issue from a narrow standpoint. I hope they will consider the plan and the policy of the Budget as a whole and form their opinion as citizens and not as motorists.³

Not all the motorists were prepared simply to acquiesce. The *Motor* wrote: "There must be a limit to what the motoring community and the motoring industry can stand in this direction, but it appears to be by no means evident to Mr Churchill."⁴ When the customary deputation of users and manufacturers called on Churchill in June, Weir – who was President of the Royal Scottish Automobile Club – wrote to Churchill's private secretary, Edward Marsh, outlining what he expected them to say. Their main demand would probably be for some relief of the road tax. "I think the motoring movement have accepted [Churchill's] proposals with a good measure of loyalty, and it would be a good thing if you could recognise this in dealing with them."⁵

The deputation did indeed press for a 25 per cent reduction in the vehicle tax. The chairman of the AA argued that ownership of a car was no longer a sign of wealth: on the principle of ability to pay, motorists should be almost the last class to be selected to relieve industry of its rate burden. Moreover, motor taxation being what it was, the man who bought a car already paid a substantial sum to encourage industry; the non-motorist paid nothing. The AA's case was supported by the bus operators, the commercial vehicle owners, and Beharrell for the SMMT. (The latter argued movingly that motoring had done much towards the better distribution of the population, and thus helped to solve the housing problem. The motor vehicle had also saved the nation in 'the great crisis' of 1926.) The dealers asked for a further cut in the tax on second-hand cars, which, they claimed, were accumulating unsold so fast as to face the industry with "one of the biggest problems it has ever had to face in its existence".

Churchill had already somewhat shaken the deputation by

compelling them to admit that they included no actual manufacturers. (To this the chairman of the AA had defensively replied: "Certainly every statement I have made will be verified. We have taken the precaution to prepare all our papers and there is nothing contradictory in any one of us.") He now told them, in his most eloquent style, that he could not meet their main request. He did not think, he said, that he had often heard a deputation representative of so many great and powerful interests and organisations put their case with so much moderation, terseness and force. Of course he realised the hardship and vexation which motorists must be feeling. But there was 'a feeling' - on whose part he did not explain - that motorists of every class were "not the least buoyant members of the community, and therefore we felt that in our difficulty and not for the purposes of giving any dole but as a lever for carrying out a great national measure of relief to productive industry we might come to you. We have come and I have only to express to you my very sincere thanks for the manner in which you have accepted what is undoubtedly burdensome and obviously unpalatable."⁶

* * * * *

But, despite the Treasury, a marked change now started to come over the government's attitude towards the motorists. A General Election was due to be held not later than October 1929. The Conservatives had lost all the five seats which they had defended in by-elections during 1928 (and were to lose a further five by the end of March 1929). By the end of 1928 the decision had been taken to call the election the following June. Tory party managers had for some time been uneasy at the lack of electoral appeal in the government's record. Baldwin's latest biographers have described some specific reasons for his government's loss of support:

The usual right-wing demands for a reduction in public expenditure had only partly been met by Churchill and the derating policy was largely misunderstood. Reform of the system led in many cases to higher assessments in the spring of 1929, and almost any increase in the rates themselves was blamed on central government policy. The Chairman of the Party was acutely sensitive to the damage which this was doing to their electoral prospects.⁷

Motorists were largely income-tax- and rate-payers, and it is not surprising that some efforts were now at last made to win their

support. Whatever demands the economy and the Exchequer might make on the motorists, the time had come to make them as little unpalatable as possible; and if any concessions could be made without running into immediate debt, so much the better.

An abortive attempt to appeal to the motorists had in fact already been made in the spring of 1928, after the announcement of a petrol tax. Sir Patrick Gower* at Conservative Central Office, anxious at the way in which a complete changeover to a petrol tax had simply been declared impossible, suggested to Ashley that it might be useful to prepare a memorandum "setting out in a crisp, concise and brief manner the advantages and disadvantages of a tax on petrol". Ashley agreed, and had his Permanent Secretary, Hurcomb, provide a draft. This, while admitting that there was something to be said for a tax which reflected road use, concluded that it would be complicated, hard to administer and likely to be widely evaded. Customs were not at all happy with this account, commenting that the catalogue of the defects of the tax might prove "rather embarrassing" if the government should later decide to introduce the tax; and that, since they were about to have to administer the 4d. tax anyway, it might be unwise to say too much about the scope for evasion. When in July Hurst suggested that the fuss about the petrol tax seemed to have died down, and that in any case "the insertion of the Colonial Secretary has created a delicate situation",† Grigg gratefully accepted his advice that it was better to do nothing for the moment.⁸

With the passage of time, the desire to do something for the motorists grew stronger. The following spring, with the prospect of a £4-million surplus in the Road Fund, the AA sent every MP a memorandum claiming among other things that, despite a period of unusually fine weather, there had been a drop in the number of cars registered (a claim confirmed by the Ministry of Transport).⁹ At about the same time, a deputation asked the Ministry of Transport for various concessions, including a tax rebate for second-hand cars. Churchill seized upon this, noting that it "seems equally

* A former Treasury civil servant, and private secretary to Law, MacDonald and Baldwin as Prime Ministers 1922-8, he had recently entered on a political career at Central Office. There had been some Parliamentary criticism of this unconventional move.

† The reference is to Amery's Cabinet memorandum on the horsepower tax - see p. 214, above.

justified by logic and policy, as it is equally sought by users and makers".¹⁰ He wrote to Ashley:

I am sure the first thing to do with [the surplus] is to try to soothe the motorists. . . . I feel that a substantial rebate on cars which are five years old, provided the manufacturers are in favour of it, would be the right thing in itself, and the best within our reach. Pray give this your best attention.¹¹

Meanwhile, Beharrell had written to Churchill from the SMMT, urging him to take action to avoid serious damage to the motor industry. Churchill noted impatiently to Grigg: "There is no use arguing with these people now. The only point is, will they call off all opposition in return for second-hand car concession? If not there is nothing doing. You should put this point to Beharrell." He also asked Grigg to find out the views of Morris and of the Ministry of Transport.¹²

The replies to these questions were not at all helpful. Grigg reported that Morris had declined to advise him as a manufacturer, and had insisted on addressing himself "to what he conceived to be the political interest of the government". He had had no idea whether the concession would appeal to other motor interests, insisting that the only relevant change would be a complete switch to the petrol tax (partly because it would "smash the oil combine"). He was also 'dead against' any proposal to reduce taxation on the medium-sized cars; this would undo all the benefits of the horse-power system, and would simply let the Ford and other American cars back into the British market.¹³

Beharrell was even less impressed. He told Grigg that the motorists absolutely insisted on reduced taxation and increased roads expenditure. Pending a final decision on both by Churchill they had been deliberately damping down their propaganda campaign; but if his decision was unfavourable, they intended to make the most of the case not only in Parliament but during the general election campaign. He ridiculed the idea that motorists could be induced to call off their opposition in return for a minor concession in old cars (which the dealers wanted but on which the manufacturers were far from united). "He appeared to think that you could not seriously imagine that this was a reasonable suggestion."¹⁴

Nor were the Ministry of Transport more encouraging. Ashley

agreed that it would be very desirable, on political grounds, to do something for the motorists, but a rebate on old cars would be liable to abuse and could be objected to on public safety grounds as likely to keep on the roads "decrepit, noisy and slow motor vehicles, which ought to be replaced by modern ones".¹⁵

The Treasury continued to treat the motorists with great delicacy. Hacking, the secretary of the SMMT, wrote to Churchill asking if he might come and put to him some suggestions about the horsepower tax. Churchill suggested simply telling him to talk to the Ministry of Transport. Grigg minuted: "This fellow Hacking is in alliance with the motorists and we don't want to offend him on the eve of the election. At the same time it is quite right to refer him to the MOT, as you suggest. Do you mind my writing to him rather humbly as in the attached draft?"¹⁶

During the same tense pre-election period of spring 1929 Amery returned to his attack on the horsepower tax, trying to persuade his colleagues that there was a good cause for abolishing it not merely on balance-of-payments grounds, but on political grounds as well. In a memorandum circulated in March, he argued that little more could now be done for the older industries, which had been helped by the derating scheme. But there were *new* basic industries, of which none could touch in importance the motor industry—"which is rapidly becoming the key industry in the modern world". The vast potential of this industry was "paralysed, so far as the external trade is concerned, by a system of taxation which is little less than insanity. Under that system it is impossible to build for use in England a car that can be sold in any quantities in any part of the Empire, or in any neutral market outside".

It was not possible for manufacturers to build special export models; and only "this crazy tax" prevented them from building cars equally suitable for British and foreign conditions. Moreover, the tax seriously discouraged car ownership even in Britain, as it taxed not the use of the car but the mere fact of its possession. Amery went on to say that the government should cease to think about revenue, and should reduce taxation so as to stimulate production. Feeling, perhaps, that his fiscal arguments might not be persuasive on their own, he added a more general argument:

Incidentally no measure could have a greater political effect. I am thinking not merely of the million or more owners of cars scattered

throughout the community, or of the help those cars might be at election time; the retention of the tax is, to all business men, standing proof of the government's incapacity to understand the problems of modern industry. Its removal would be hailed as evidence, not only of a real desire to help, but, above all, of a 'forward view'.¹⁷

There is no sign that this memorandum was ever discussed by the Cabinet. Certainly it led to no change in taxation policy. The efforts of Ministers and civil servants were directed towards justifying the existing system. The importance they attached to this, and the anxiety which they felt at the political activities of the motor interests, are clearly shown in a debate that broke out within the Treasury, and between it and the Ministry of Transport, over some statistics which Beharrell handed in on behalf of the SMMT in March 1929. These purported to show that motor taxation was far higher in Britain than in most other countries, and also that motor vehicles paid more in taxation than the extra expenditure on roads incurred in consequence of motors.¹⁸ These figures were at once demonstrated by the Ministry of Transport to be out of date and misleading. The SMMT admitted this, and Beharrell readjusted them in a letter to *The Times*.¹⁹ But, argued Hurst, some kind of reply should be produced, to hand out to MPs and others to counter the motorists' campaign, and it would be a pity not to follow up the opening provided by the SMMT's error. Hurcomb agreed; it should be brought home that the deputation had relied on obsolete and incomplete facts and grossly misrepresented the position in favour of their own case. Churchill also agreed:

Certain typical cars were taken by him and the taxation stated in certain terms. We should brutally rebut these figures and show what the real taxation is. We should then proceed to state that the cars selected by him are not really representative, and pick out three or four cars that are, in our opinion, representative and truly typical. Then go through the same process.

But when the Treasury and Transport came to do this, they found it virtually impossible to make out a watertight case. Churchill commented uneasily, after seeing the papers again, that he began to wonder if there would be any advantages in "stirring up the arguments with these people. They seem to have shot their bolt for the moment." Several weeks later, Grigg suggested simply sending all the available material to Central Office, together with the

motorists' own pamphlet, to use as they thought fit. Churchill was doubtful:

There is no objection to sending this to the Central Office, but they should also be warned that in my opinion at the present moment it is better not to revive the subject. The motorists will be gradually forgetting themselves as motorists, and most of them will be remembering that they are Conservatives. I think this is a case of the least said the soonest mended.

Grigg wrote to Gower in this sense, adding that "we had a crushing answer to give to [the deputation] if the occasion required. Of course Beharrell . . . knew perfectly well that the Ministry of Transport could blow his figures out of the water." He warned Gower not to act without consulting Churchill.²⁰

By now the Treasury's reluctance to alter the relative shares of taxation of the different types of vehicle was becoming almost a matter of principle. This reflected their belief that after twenty years of empiricism an intellectually and politically valid system of roads finance was starting to emerge. It was basic to this system that private motorists should not be – and should not think themselves to be – heavily burdened, and therefore automatically entitled to relief. Whatever they may have felt, in the Treasury's eyes they were the gainers from a long-term change in the theory and practice of motor taxation, and could not reasonably expect to be given anything more.

In an internal Treasury memorandum about this time it was argued that some basis of principle in road taxation was now emerging. The 1926 Budget had been the first serious attempt at a logical system of taxation. It had rested on two principles: that all taxation should be related to road use; and that private cars should also pay a luxury duty. The memorandum continued by saying that the argument in terms of luxury defeated any claim from the private motorists that they were paying too much for their use of the roads. After the 1926 Budget, about 31 per cent of motor-tax revenue had come from goods vehicles, 48 per cent from private cars; with petrol duty, the goods vehicles' share rose to 48 per cent, the private cars' fell to 24 per cent. Any further changes would have to be made gradually, and probably not for some time.²¹

Nothing more could be done for private motorists because a lot was being done already. Nothing could be done for the commercial

interests because their share of the burden was being increased as a matter of policy. Nothing could be done for the road-users collectively because, again, as a matter of policy, they were being taxed for the benefit of the railways. The petrol tax, as Customs wrote to the Treasury a few years later, had been imposed principally to raise money for the derating scheme – but incidentally to stimulate domestic oil production, and “to impose an additional burden on road transport in order to help the railways”.²² Within a few years this common menace had brought all the road-users together – as they had been together in 1919 – to resist it.

There were thus, by 1929, several distinct arguments running concurrently: between the private motorists and the commercial users, about the relative shares of the road tax burden; between all the road-users and the government, about the size of the total burden; between road-users and the railways, with the government as a heavily-committed third party, about transport at large. The problems were so complex, administratively and politically, that the government had set up the Royal Commission on Transport in 1928 to look into them and to advise on the control and co-ordination of road transport as a whole. Politically, the situation was still further complicated by the proposals of the Lloyd George Liberals for heavy expenditure on roads as a means of reducing unemployment. Once more, the proposals as such are only incidental to this study; but while the ensuing arguments lasted, the motorists were involved.

In 1928 the famous Liberal ‘yellow book’, *Britain's Industrial Future*, had put forward a closely argued case for something very like a managed economy. In the spring of 1929, Lloyd George published detailed proposals for an emergency unemployment programme in an electioneering pamphlet, *We Can Conquer Unemployment*. Work was to be provided for hundreds of thousands of men through massive public expenditure on houses, telephones, electricity and, above all, roads. (There was to be a new trunk roads programme, a ring roads programme, as well as schemes for rebuilding and widening roads and bridges, and for doing away with level crossings.) The motor interests were quick to take this up. When an industry deputation called on Churchill in March 1929, they asked among other things for a heavy programme of road-building, financed by loans.

The Treasury's face was set firmly against such schemes. Their objections to the whole Liberal programme were summed up in

Churchill's exposition to the Cabinet of the reply he intended to make to the motor industry. He would show them that

state borrowing for purposes like a road programme could only be drawn out of the general fund of available credit, and consequently at the expense of private borrowers; that the employment to be obtained from road construction was limited, both in amount and in time, and compared unfavourably with permanent industries that might be established by private borrowing.

He could promise only reasonable expenditure, in minor ways and as exceptional measures, whether financed by a loan or otherwise.²³ With this the motorists had to be content. The objections of the Ministry of Transport to the Liberal proposals were slightly different. They were summed up in a minute from the Chief Engineer, Bressey:

... While the programme itself may be excellent (being based upon our Department's work and preparation) yet the timetable is impracticable. The complete remodelling of our entire highway system and all its bridges would demand ten years at least. It cannot be compressed into two years and no large volume of work can be provided in three months. To treat the malady of unemployment in this way is as absurd as to attempt to cure an underfed patient by ordering him to eat a week's victuals at a single meal.²⁴

This argument was expanded in the section contributed by Transport to the official White Paper replying to the Lloyd George proposals, which added that a rushed programme of this kind might not pay enough attention to the beauties of the countryside, and would need 'dictatorship' to put it through.²⁵ Baldwin leaned heavily on these arguments in using roads as the focus of a swingeing attack which he made on Lloyd George's proposals in a public speech in March.²⁶

In retrospect these arguments seem to have no relevance to a discussion of the private car, but to relate only to unemployment in general. Objectively, this is obviously correct: in this context the interests of road-users, and of private motorists as one class of road-user, were – as in other discussions about the distribution of taxation they were not – entirely subordinate to the needs of the unemployed and the struggle against financial orthodoxy. But the private car was given a spurious relevance by the tactics used, by Churchill in particular, in rebutting the Liberals. One of the main

arguments which he used to defend financial orthodoxy, when others failed, was precisely the notion that expenditure on roads was expenditure for the benefit of private ('pleasure') motorists. Churchill's public comments on the Liberal proposals revived and extended the arguments the Treasury had devised to justify the raids on the Road Fund; they equated the road-user with the Edwardian private scorcher, and tried to play on an attitude to motor transport which by now was years out of date. In his Budget statement, Churchill went out of his way to pour scorn on Lloyd George; he summarised his roads proposals as being "to borrow £200 million and to spend it upon paying the unemployed to make racing tracks for well-to-do motorists to make the ordinary pedestrian skip; and we are assured that the mere prospect of this has entirely revived the Liberal party".²⁷

This was crude stuff, and Lloyd George was justified in his pained rejoinder that this was not what he had in mind. There were half a million commercial vehicles on the roads, and it was no use talking about a serious problem of this kind "as if it were merely a matter of providing tracks for luxury motors".²⁸ He might also have pointed out that the Liberals had in fact gone to some lengths to distinguish pleasure motorists from commercial users; in *Britain's Industrial Future* it had been suggested that British roads might well already be the best in the world for pleasure motoring, but that they were quite inadequate for industrial, commercial, agricultural and social requirements.

On the other hand, Churchill's line of defence was quite consistent with the fact that in arguments about road transport the spokesmen for the private motor car still made most of the running. The motorists' main claim – that British motor-owners paid in taxation far more than the annual cost of the highways system – hinged on showing that the private car in particular paid too much, and more than in other motor-using countries. It might be argued that the very success of the MLC, which kept for the private motor car a salience in politics which in economics it had virtually lost, weakened the political position of the road-users as a whole.

Churchill was willing to rely on his own tactic of making the motorists appear absurd, as he had been content not to stir the motorists up again by trying publicly to refute their contentions about roads finance. But others were not. In early May 1929, Gower wrote again from Tory Central Office, complaining that on enquiry

he found some dissatisfaction among motorists. He enclosed a copy of a leaflet setting out the motorists' case – based, he believed, on figures produced by “an anti-Conservative motoring paper known as the *Motor*”. He suggested that it might be worth preparing a short article, to be signed by the Minister of Transport, which could get publicity in the press and favourable comment in the *Autocar*.²⁹ Churchill agreed, and approved also the text of the article which Ashley later sent to him. It set out to prove the motorists' figures false and to show that – once the special ‘luxury’ element in the private car tax was set aside – most private cars paid less in taxation than in most countries except the United States.³⁰

Parliament had now been dissolved, and the campaign was entering its last stages before the election at the end of May. The article was distributed as a handout by the Central Office. A week before the election, Central Office suggested to Ashley that he might follow up his article with a widely circulated letter to the press. A draft was enclosed. This ran through the same arguments as the article, and concluded:

I appeal to Motorists, therefore, not to allow any special pleading to prejudice them against the Conservative party. They have been very fairly treated – the petrol tax, for example, falls lightly on the owner-driver whose small car gives him a high mileage to the gallon. Mr Baldwin deserves the support of the motoring community both against socialism, which would mean so heavy an addition to general taxation, and against the Liberal schemes, which by extravagant and wasteful expenditure on roads would do much to endanger and discredit wise schemes for highway development.

Central Office suggested that this letter might have a “very good effect in the provincial papers”,³¹ but the Ministry of Transport, although agreeing that the facts were more or less as set out in the letter, were much less enthusiastic about distributing it at all. Hurcomb sent Ashley a minute which, with the utmost tact, pointed out that as a Minister he had responsibilities as the head of a department no less than as a party politician. He reminded him that Churchill had never sent the reply which he had promised to the industry deputation in March. If the only reply, other than the article already circulated, were to be an eve-of-poll appeal on purely party lines, the deputation might have fair grounds for complaint.

THE MOTOR CAR AND POLITICS: 1896-1970

There was another point: departmental policy had to be consistent as well as politically sound:

It will shortly be necessary to lay before the Royal Commission on Transport a reasoned and dispassionate explanation of the Government's views on this matter in answer to the evidence of Sir George Beharrell. If that statement has to follow very closely the lines of a letter issued in the circumstances of the present moment its submission as evidence will not be easy.

Ashley, convinced, scrawled: "I do *not* wish to publish anything further."³² Three days later the election was held, and within a week his ministerial career was over.

II

MORE NUISANCE THAN BARREL ORGANS

Other attempts to control the motor car

The motor car of course raised issues other than the speed limit and questions of taxation. Some, such as noise or the details of vehicle lighting, were inherently trivial. Others, such as the need for third-party insurance, touched on basic questions of human rights. The ways in which governments handled these and other questions varied greatly; as political problems, they are of interest less because of their own significance, which was often slight, than because of the insights they afford into the working of government between the wars.

Noise, like dust, impinged on the community at large, and it is not surprising that from the earliest days of the motor vehicle Ministers were deeply concerned to do something about it. As early as 1905 there had been much correspondence in the press, and complaints had been sent to the Home Office about the noise of the new motor buses in particular. (A Home Office official had commented: "On the whole I doubt if they are as much nuisance as barrel organs.")¹ This discussion had continued intermittently ever since; Herbert Gladstone noted ironically in the summer of 1908: "Attacks seem based on assumption, that we dearly love the motor bus, its magnificent noise, its equable and proper speed, and its agreeable odours." The Home Office did not love the motor bus, but were quite content to accept Gladstone's terse conclusion: "Not inclined to indicate legislation, till present law proved a failure."²

The problem grew worse, as the number of motor vehicles in London grew. By 1912, 8,000 motor taxis, over 5,000 motor buses and 9,000 private cars were registered in the LCC area. Although only a quarter remained of the ten thousand horse-cabs and hansoms of five years before, traffic was still dominated by the horse: a census of all traffic entering the City during a working day in April 1911 recorded 19,000 mechanical vehicles of all kinds, and over

50,000 horse-drawn vehicles.³ But it was the motor vehicles which the public noticed. Churchill was at the Home Office when a correspondent complained that the noise of motor traffic was making London an impossible place in which to live. "I shall have to give up my membership of this club on account of the hooting which goes on without ceasing day and night. . . ."⁴

The problem was taken seriously. In the summer of 1911, representatives of the police and the motorists met officials of the Home Office and the LGB and were told that "the Home Secretary was anxious to do anything which would reduce noises in London subject to due regard to the public safety . . .". For the AA, Stenson Cooke promised that they would do their best.⁵ The same autumn, the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police issued a circular:

For some time past there has been a growing volume of complaints against the unnecessary and nerve-racking noises made at night by the drivers of motor vehicles. . . . It is quite certain that unless some alteration is brought about by motorists of their own impulse there will be an insistent demand for repressive legislation.⁶

The Commissioner advised motorists to take action in their own interests. The *Economist* commented, not unfairly:

But there has been this insistent demand for years, and why should a motoring parliament and the motorists who control the government departments take any more notice of this demand in the future than they have done in the past? . . . It seems certain that the motorists, who have Parliament, and the press, and the leading men of the civil service behind them, are in a position to hold their own against any number of 'insistent demands for repressive legislation'.⁷

At about this time a back-bench MP introduced a Private Member's Bill aiming to ban 'exhaust-blown' alarms. The same Member asked the Home Secretary if he was aware that motorists in London not infrequently opened their 'cut-outs' and allowed the exhaust gases to escape without first passing through the silencer. Home Office officials suggested that he reply that the facts were indeed as stated, "and that some motorists are so grossly inconsiderate as to drive in London with open cut-outs". The LGB were asked for their comments. Their answer illustrates the difficulties of coping, on the basis of past knowledge, with the technical

complexities of the motor car; Monro, who was after all the senior LGB official responsible for regulations affecting motor vehicles, replied: "Perhaps you could let us have the evidence upon which the first paragraph is based. I am afraid I am not motorist enough to recognise a cut-out when I see it."⁸

Many others who could not recognise a cut-out were sure they could recognise a noisy vehicle. A *Punch* cartoon in the summer of 1911 showed a desperate insomniac tormented by the sounds of motor cars. But how to define "noisy" in water-tight terms which would satisfy a court of law? Although Home Office files in these years were busy with letters from inventors claiming to have devised fool-proof noise-meters, none could stand up to tests. This meant that even "repressive legislation" was of little use. In early 1912 the LGB nerved themselves to issue an Order banning cut-outs and similar devices. But the technical problem made it extremely hard to enforce. When in June an MP pointed out that the Order was continually disregarded, the Home Office commented: "Owing to the average constable's lack of technical knowledge of the subject and other inherent difficulties, . . . further instructions to the police are not likely to be helpful."⁹ It is instructive to compare with this somewhat despairing remark the bland reply actually given by McKenna: that he had received no complaints since the Order was issued, and that the police reported that the nuisance was diminishing. He promised to consider if further action was necessary or practicable.¹⁰ There is no sign that he was moved by the letter forwarded to the Home Office by the LGB some months later, in which a correspondent listed in order the noises he and others wished to see prevented: "Explosions of motor-cycles and 'cut-outs'; heavy commercial motor traffic; whistling for taxicabs; hooters, old and noisy engines and gears; running of engines while waiting; rattling of milk-cans; crowing of cocks; barking of dogs."¹¹

When a little later the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police suggested to the Home Office that it should be made an offence to have a cut-out fitted at all, this was hotly resisted by Elliott, the Home Office's most enthusiastic motorist.¹² The only action that followed was a circular in May 1913 from the Home Office to chief constables, reminding them of the LGB regulations banning the use of cut-outs.¹³

After the war, by contrast, noise became the subject of a vigorous

personal campaign by Joynson-Hicks at the Home Office. "I will not stand this any longer", Hicks noted in July 1926 on a letter from a manufacturer suggesting that noise should be blamed on the user, not the maker: "act sternly".¹⁴ A year later, when stern action had produced no results, he told the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police to proceed to "exterminate the nuisance". It may have been Hicks' own links with the motor trade that encouraged him to act boldly with them; their expostulations were overridden with a firmness paralleled only by Churchill's in his inroads on the Road Fund. When a manufacturer suggested that it was hard to distinguish between an adequately and an inadequately silenced motor cycle, Hicks declined a bland official draft and dictated his own reply:

Sir William Joynson-Hicks cannot understand how anybody can feel that there is a difficulty in deciding between a machine which is decently silenced and one which goes past a row of houses in the middle of the night like a Gatling gun, and he is determined to put a stop to this latter infliction upon the amenities of life of those of His Majesty's subjects who desire to live a fairly quiet existence.¹⁵

In the summer of 1926 Joynson-Hicks told an MP who passed on a complaint from the motor cycle manufacturers: "May I tell you personally that I have received more letters of commendation for my action in this than in almost anything I have done in my political career, and I am determined to put a stop to what is really an outrage upon the community."¹⁶

With this kind of backing, the police did their best. Prosecutions in London for silencer offences rose sharply over the next few years.* But except in extreme cases the difficulty of defining 'noise' was a real one, and the problem was still unsolved in the mid-1930s. The Ministry of Transport took powers under the Road Traffic Act, 1934, to ban the use of hooters in certain circumstances, and at the end of August that year an Order declared a 'zone of silence' covering an area within five miles radius of King Charles' statue at Charing Cross, between 11.30 at night and 7 a.m. But they resisted suggestions that the Act should also allow them to ban the sale of noisy vehicles, arguing that it would be unenforceable, would lay too much of the onus on manufacturers, and that although it would appeal to the general public, "it is the kind of general appeal we

* From 5,000 plus in 1927, to 16,400 in 1929 and to 18,600 in 1930.¹⁷

want to avoid". The then Minister, Oliver Stanley,* suggested that this kind of problem should continue to be dealt with – as it was being – through voluntary co-operation by the industry.¹⁸ The Commons accepted this argument, but the Lords did not, and inserted a new clause.¹⁹ This led to immediate protests from the manufacturers. When Stanley was replaced in mid-Bill by Hore-Belisha, the latter asked his officials whether he should leave the new clause in the Bill, or whether good relations with the motor industry required that he have it struck out. He was advised that there was no need to fight it. The industry knew and appreciated that Stanley had done his best, and "the fact that the House of Lords has insisted on the inclusion of these words in the Bill will not prevent you from asking the industry to afford the same spirit of friendly cooperation as your predecessor hoped to obtain".²⁰

In fact the industry's fears were premature. 'Noise', like 'danger', was still a subjective notion. A Ministry of Transport departmental committee produced four reports between 1935 and 1937 in the attempt to define it more scientifically.²¹ The problem was still unsolved after the war. In the early 1960s another (the Wilson) committee tackled it, trying this time to relate subjective annoyance to objective standards of measurement by measuring vehicle noises on a meter and at the same time asking a panel of observers to assess them on a graded scale. This committee, reporting in 1963, recommended specific limits for permissible noise²²; these limits were embodied in draft regulations issued, but not immediately brought into law, by the Ministry of Transport. Meanwhile, noise increased. The major causes by now were buses and heavy lorries, although many motor cycles and some sports cars also exceeded the Wilson Committee's limits. There was some public criticism of this failure to act; the Ministry of Transport's own 'Cars for Cities' Working Group commented in 1967:

... Without a defined and measurable standard of what constitutes excessive noise, it is difficult to enforce [the existing] regulations, which are, therefore, of limited value. ... Progress has undoubtedly

* Oliver Stanley (1896–1950): Conservative MP, 1924–45. Under-Secretary, Home Office, 1931–3; Minister of Transport, 1933–4; later Minister of Labour, President of Education, President of Board of Trade, Secretary of State for War, Colonies. "His wit and sardonic humour were refreshing to a generation grown accustomed to the harsh sneer of invective and abuse" (*The Times*).

been retarded by the delay in bringing into force the Minister's draft regulations of 1963 which would by now have applied to the 2 million new vehicles registered since the beginning of 1965. . . .²³

There was further criticism when the draft regulations were revised in the same year to allow higher levels. In July 1968 the regulations finally came into force. The following year the Minister of Transport acknowledged criticisms that the limits were too high: "We had to be realistic about this. It was no good setting limits that operators and manufacturers could not meet without putting an intolerable burden on vehicle users. The levels were set after long discussions with manufacturers. . . ." ²⁴

* * * * *

Ministers could at least claim to have taken some action to deal with vehicle noise. An extraordinary contrast is presented by the government's long-drawn-out failure to deal decisively with another problem - vehicle lighting. In the case of noise, public opinion made it necessary for Ministers to appear to be taking action in laying down standards, although in practice, for technical reasons, it was a long time before such standards could be enforced. With lights, the technical difficulties were soon disposed of; but the absence of general public feeling, plus the variety of interested points of view and, often, the lack of personal authority on the part of the Minister chiefly concerned, combined to prevent any action at all. This intrinsically trivial episode is worth looking at in a little detail because it illustrates so well the paralysis to which thorough-going pluralism can lead - especially when the government, regarded merely as one group among others, lacks even the authority derived from technical expertise.

Arguments about the lighting of vehicles predated the birth of the motor vehicle. The Local Government Act of 1888 gave local authorities powers to make bye-laws about the lighting of vehicles in their area, and by the 1890s the bewildering variety of these regulations, and often their inadequacy, had led to demands for more thorough and uniform rules. Much of the pressure came from the cyclists (then the fastest users of the roads), sometimes supported by the tramways; most of the opposition came from the farmers and the timber hauliers. When a Private Member's Bill requiring all vehicles to carry lights was introduced in 1896, the Home Office noted that it would doubtless lead to protests from the timber

trade, but that "now that bicycles are in such common use, their riders are a strong enough body to agitate very effectively . . .".²⁵

This concern with the likely reactions of the interests affected was to be typical of official thinking about this trivial yet necessary measure, and its many successors, for over forty years to come. The 1896 Bill was indeed objected to. Four years later the cyclists sent a draft Bill of their own to the Home Office for comments. The Home Office found the principle acceptable, but once again the probable reactions of the interests prevailed. Officials commented that lighting regulations were mainly a matter for local authorities, "and if they desire legislation, it would be best to leave them to promote it". The Cyclists' Touring Club were told that the time had not yet come when legislation "in the unqualified form suggested . . . would be accepted by Parliament for the country at large".²⁶ The CTC insisted, and their Bill was introduced as a Private Member's measure in 1901. The Home Office commented again that it was sound in principle, but certain to be opposed by the railways, agricultural and other interests.²⁷ It made no progress.²⁸

The arrival of the motor car thus merely added further demands and counter-demands to an already complex situation. Motorists themselves were more concerned even than the cyclists to insist that lights should be carried on slow-moving farm and other vehicles. Other road-users protested against the very bright acetylene lights carried by cars. The motorists moved first. The next Bill, in May 1905, was introduced by the Scottish Automobile Club, backed by the tramways. But – as the Scottish Office took care to tell the Home Office – the Scottish farmers objected strongly to the Bill, and the Secretary of State for Scotland, discussing it with a farmers' deputation, had agreed to oppose it. Lucky in the Ballot, the Bill got as far as a Second Reading debate. It was hotly attacked by several Members, including Mr Wason (Orkney and Shetland) who described it as "prompted partly by a reactionary Toryism, and partly to meet the demands of a very small and selfish class of the community – the motorists. The Bill would strike at the principle of local government in this country. (*Hear, hear.*) They on their side did not want uniformity in this matter. . . ." These barely rational sentiments just prevailed; the Bill was lost by 109 votes to 108.²⁹

The cyclists put their case to the Royal Commission on Motor Cars later the same year.³⁰ The Royal Commission were not impressed. They thought it would not be 'reasonable or practicable'

to require all horse-drawn vehicles to carry a tail-light. Perhaps to balance this, they did not think that there was anything to be done about limiting the brightness of car headlamps, of which many witnesses had complained.³¹

The following year the cyclists brought forward their Bill again, but it failed to find a place. In 1907, they sent it to the Home Office with a request for comments. Slightly amended, it now simply required all vehicles to carry a forward-facing white light. No exceptions of any kind were provided. Officials, although pointing out that the Bill would be objected to as 'pro-motorist', agreed that the time had now come to make the law uniform. So did the Parliamentary Secretary, Herbert Samuel, and the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone. The Cyclists' Touring Club were told, privately, that the Home Office regarded the Bill benevolently.³² On the Bill's Second Reading debate, the mover expressed the hope that its provisions would persuade motorists, for their part, to abandon the use of glaring headlights, "the terror of the countryside". Herbert Samuel welcomed the Bill and hoped it would bring about minimum national standards of lighting, including for the dangerous farm cart. Walter Long for the Opposition echoed Samuel, and hoped that no exemptions would be allowed.³³

This was too optimistic. The Bill was given a Second Reading, but throughout its long progress through committee it was gradually whittled down. Amendments were passed allowing certain exemptions – for instance, for vehicles carrying inflammable goods, and for carts carrying produce to stack or barn during August, September and October. By the time the Bill reached the House of Lords it was supported not only by the Motor Union, the RIA and the CTC but also by the Urban District Councils' Association and the Central Chamber of Agriculture. But the cost of this impressive support had been the many qualifications made to the Bill's originally straightforward proposals, and there was some justice in the Opposition complaint that it was now a muddle and full of inconsistencies.³⁴ Before it finally passed into law Scotland was excluded entirely, hand-propelled vehicles were exempted, and the exemption for farm vehicles was extended to any months specified by order (to allow for the hay harvest, as well as the corn).

Wartime regulations required most vehicles to carry not only front lights but also a red tail-light. After the war the Ministry of Transport, as part of its peacetime reconstruction programme, set

up a departmental committee under Maybury to discuss vehicle lighting. After hearing evidence from the various interested parties the Committee produced two reports in the spring of 1920, recommending that the wartime requirements should be kept, and embodied in new legislation.³⁵ Maybury's department quickly produced a draft Lights on Vehicles Bill, based on these recommendations; Maybury told Geddes that there should be little difficulty in securing overwhelming support for it.³⁶ But Parliamentary business made it impossible to do anything about the Bill for nearly two years; it was only in February 1922 that the Ministry asked the Home Affairs Committee for authority to introduce its Bill – adding that the only point likely to cause controversy was the requirement for bicycle tail-lights (which had already led to some opposition, and so was still being considered).³⁷

The Committee were less hopeful. They feared that such a detailed Bill would lead to prolonged discussion in Parliament; worse, many of the points might prove controversial. There was also bound to be objection to the powers given to the Minister of Transport to make regulations. The Ministry of Transport was asked to simplify the Bill and to restrict its coverage, and to produce a new draft “which would give rise to the least possible controversy”.³⁸ By June, this had been done. Neal told the Committee that although some cyclists would object to being compelled to carry a rear light, this was essential in the interests of themselves and of other road-users.³⁹ (His memorandum did not say, as had an earlier draft, that the revisions made to the Bill would “meet the objections of some of my colleagues that motorists will be subjected to inconvenience and expense”⁴⁰; but this was its theme.)

The Cabinet, still uneasy about the Bill, hit on a device for seeming to take action while not in fact doing so. The Bill was to be brought in to the Lords, but only “on the understanding that it was not carried to the point where it would be sent to the Commons”.⁴¹ Thus, although in August the government for the first time in peacetime proposed that every vehicle on the public highway should carry two white lights in front, one red at the back, little progress had been made by the following January; the Home Affairs Committee were again discussing yet another draft of the Bill. The cyclists had indeed complained about the tail-lights requirement, and the Ministry of Transport had gratefully hit on the compromise of allowing them to carry reflectors instead. Several other Ministers

supported this move. In the Home Office, officials noted ruefully that many chief constables had asked that bicycles be required to carry lights. To allow reflectors would be a definite change of policy. But they did not feel that they could question the considered judgement of the Ministry of Transport.⁴²

A fortnight later Ashley told the Home Affairs Committee that he had reconsidered the point; the Bill therefore required rear *lights* for bicycles, after all. But, he added, it might be possible at the report stage to concede the adequacy of reflectors.⁴³ The Committee asked him to set out his arguments in a new memorandum. This he did a few weeks later, having meanwhile reached a strange and complex agreement with the motoring interests. He told the Committee that since their last discussion he had seen representatives of the RAC, AA, SMMT, commercial and bus operators. They were unanimous that the Bill should be proceeded with at once. They also felt that rear lights on bicycles were essential for safety. But even if the Bill did not require rear lights, they would be prepared to support it if they were assured that the government would allow a free vote on any amendment requiring lights, and that the government Bill would not *require* reflectors.⁴⁴ Ashley solemnly told the Committee that he had given both these assurances, and now asked for permission to introduce the Bill in a form embodying them.

It might have been thought that the way was now clear to go ahead with the Bill. But when the HAC came to discuss it again, they decided that it might be prudent "to obtain the concurrence of the agricultural interests" – who were of course affected by the basic requirement that all vehicles should carry lights. The discussion was adjourned, to allow the Ministry of Transport to consult the Ministry of Agriculture about the lighting of farm vehicles. Two months later, the Home Office noted in a minute summarising the whole confusing story, the matter still stood adjourned. At the end of October the Central Conference of Chief Constables unanimously resolved that bicycles should be required to carry rear lights. The Home Office passed this on to Transport, though doubtless without much hope of results.⁴⁵

There were no results at all. A year, and the first Labour government, later, Joynson-Hicks wrote from the Home Office to Ashley that the Commissioner of Police had warned him of "the grave dangers arising to the traffic of this country by reason of cyclists

riding without rear lights or any other indication of their existence", and asked him to consider the matter with a view to putting proposals to the Cabinet.⁴⁶ The substance of Ashley's answer can be guessed from Hicks' next letter, which argued that it really was in the interest of the cyclists themselves that they should carry some form of indication at night. A reflector would be better than nothing. He concluded: "The views of the police are so strong in regard to this matter that I would be glad if you would reconsider the possibility of bringing in a Bill."⁴⁷

Nothing happened for another two years. The draft Motor Vehicles Bill drawn up in 1924 had required lights for bicycles, and a memorandum prepared by the Ministry of Transport the following spring had noted this as a possible subject of controversy. The cyclists had again told the department that they would resist lights, but would accept reflectors. On this, officials commented that restrictions on dazzling headlights – another possibly controversial subject – "might be a hardship" unless cyclists were better lit.⁴⁸ But by March 1926 Ashley was merely asking the cyclists if they would still be prepared to accept reflectors. They graciously told him that although they had originally opposed reflectors as the first step towards compulsory lights, they now understood that it would probably be a long time before further motor-vehicle legislation was passed, and therefore would not oppose reflectors.⁴⁹

This agreement was reflected in the next version of the Bill, which was introduced as a Private Member's Bill in February 1927. This allowed bicycles to get away with efficient rear red reflectors. It came in for much criticism: for being so similar to the relevant section of the government's draft Road Vehicles Bill (published in March) that it should have been frankly presented as a government Bill instead of masquerading as a Private Member's measure; for not making bicycle rear lights compulsory; for encouraging motorists to speed at night, to the danger of unlit pedestrians; for evading the basic need for well-lit roads. But despite this lack of welcome, the Bill was given an unopposed Second Reading⁵⁰ and went to committee.

At this point the farmers came actively on to the scene. They protested against the expense and inconvenience of having to maintain three lights on vehicles which spent most of their working life off the public roads in conditions which would soon destroy or at least extinguish any light. The Ministry of Transport had expected

this. In January Piggott had rejected a suggestion from Rolls-Royce that all vehicles should be fitted with horns, commenting: "As practical politics, I cannot see any chance of including any provision on this point in the . . . Bill"; the Ministry was already trying to make lights compulsory for farm vehicles, and to add horns to this would probably kill the whole Bill.⁵¹ The Ministry of Transport now tried to appease the farmers with a characteristic compromise. Ashley wrote to Joynson-Hicks that he was prepared to let small farm vehicles dispense with separate rear red lights if their front lights showed red behind. "This is as far as we ought to go in the way of concession for a start, and see whether such requirements would in fact meet with any substantial opposition." Joynson-Hicks replied that although he personally had no objections, Ashley should perhaps consult the Minister of Agriculture. Ashley replied gratefully that he would do this, and would improve on it by consulting the Secretary of State for Scotland as well.⁵²

This consultation had two consequences. It led to concessions to the farmers, who agreed with the Ministry of Transport and during the committee stage themselves moved amendments – which were of course accepted – to let horse-drawn farm vehicles carry only one front lamp and one rear reflector. The second consequence, which followed from the first, was that the amended Bill now ran into opposition from the private motorists. The *Motor* noted with disgust that the farmers "have very considerably lowered the practical value of the Bill from the public safety point of view".⁵³ When the Bill came up for its Third Reading, its nominal sponsor, Mr Lougher, introduced it as entirely non-controversial. At this point Mr Crawford, a Liberal and prominent motoring spokesman, jumped up and protested at what he portrayed as an attempt to smuggle through the exemption for horse-drawn farm vehicles – which, he charged, undermined the whole principle of the Bill. Though Lougher claimed he had consulted the motoring organisations and was supported in this by Ashley – "I understand that all their wishes have been acceded to" – Crawford succeeded in talking the Bill out (abetted by a Mr Kelly, who asked if the cyclists had been consulted, and suggested that the motorists "imagine that the roads are made for them and for them alone").⁵⁴

The next day Ashley wrote to Joynson-Hicks, in some distress. He reminded him that he, Ashley, had in effect taken over from Hicks the task of steering the Bill through Parliament, and added

that the Chief Whip had promised to find time for the Third Reading in the autumn. "May I therefore conclude that you would wish me to forge ahead as quickly as possible with this excellent little Bill?" Hicks' private secretary noted rather tiredly: "It is for M. of T. to make up his mind whether he wishes to forge ahead", but replied on his Minister's behalf that there was no objection to Ashley's fathering the Bill and forging ahead.⁵⁵

But this Ashley could not do without help. When Parliament returned in the autumn, he was once again writing to Hicks about the Bill. "You will recollect that when we last discussed this Bill", he wrote rather disingenuously, "you said, 'Go right ahead with it for all you are worth.'" He then asked Hicks to urge on Cave, the chairman of the H A C, the importance of the Committee's approving the completion of this popular and necessary Bill. His letter neatly summarises the sinuous path which it had been necessary to steer between the competing claims of the various interests. "It would be a thousand pities if it failed to secure the necessary hour or so . . . as it imposes, what motorists are so keen on, either a rear red light or reflector on cyclists. . . . I hear there is a certain disposition on the part of the AA to complain that concessions are given to agricultural interests in the matter of lighting, but these concessions . . . were passed without comment in committee, and agriculturalists always receive special treatment at the hands of all parties in legislation."⁵⁶

Hicks spoke to Cave, and the Bill went on its way. But the motorists did not take the same view of the need to appease the farmers. They objected strongly to the concessions made, and in November Hicks wrote to Ashley warning him off:

I saw Stenson Cooke - in fact I had a long talk with him after luncheon this afternoon and found him quite hopeless on the subject of the Lights and Vehicles Bill; and Sir George Beharrell told me that the chairman of the AA was equally obstinate.

I think you will have to consider either dropping the Bill or pushing it through after 11 o'clock on some evening. He has promised to send me some pictures he has had drawn showing the inadequacy of the offside light on haycarts when a motorist is coming out of a cross-road on the nearside but in any case they are out for blood and I could not move him at all.

So sorry.⁵⁷

Further refinement of the Bill might have seemed impossible. The motorists were insisting on three lights, while the farmers had

pushed the government into agreeing that one would be enough. But negotiations continued, and shortly before the long delayed Commons Third Reading Ashley was informed that the Tory Parliamentary Agricultural Committee had agreed that horse-drawn agricultural vehicles should carry *two* lights when "used otherwise than for harvesting and for other internal agricultural purposes".⁵⁸ In the House, replying to Crawford's protests about the concessions made to the farmers in committee, Ashley was able to announce this ingenious compromise. He went on to disclaim any firm government opinion one way or the other: "The Government have a perfectly open mind on the matter and I have not much doubt that in another place that view, which I think is the general view of the House at the present time, will be considered". He urged the House to pass the Bill; it was a non-party measure, which would not only save cyclists but would also be "a great boon" to motorists.⁵⁹

But when the Bill reached the Lords, Ashley's implied promise was ignored. Complaining loudly about the government's weakness in face of the farmers, Montagu moved an amendment for the motorists, requiring farm carts to carry more than one light. But the government gave it no support; Lord Peel ostentatiously declined to express even a personal view between the motorists' and the farmers' case. In the vote on Montagu's amendment, all the government supporters present joined in voting it down.⁶⁰

Back in the Commons again, Ashley managed to preserve the Bill as the Lords had kept it, although not without some lobbying: a letter from a Tory back-bencher acknowledged Ashley's thanks for his help with the Bill, and added: "I thought your getting through all those Lords amendments was a triumph of tact - with all the Clydeside present. I am particularly glad that Stenson Cooke has had a rebuff."⁶¹

The motorists felt that they had been betrayed. In the *Motor* Crawford furiously denounced the government both for a failure to consult the national interest and for breaking faith. Public policy had been "wantonly sacrificed to private interests". What was more, he had withdrawn his own amendment, which would have restored the Bill to its original form, at the request of the Ministry of Transport and on the understanding that it could be moved in the Lords. Moved it was, but its loss had been certain when Ministers there both spoke and voted against it.⁶²

Crawford would probably have been ever more vehement had he

known how little progress there was to be in the next ten years. The Royal Commission of 1929 did not question the existing requirements for carts or bicycles, and the 1930 Act made no changes in them. When the next draft Road Traffic Bill was presented to the Cabinet in 1933, the Minister of Transport, Oliver Stanley, commented – not quite accurately – that in 1921 an existing requirement that cyclists should carry rear lamps had been “abandoned in the face of great Parliamentary opposition”; he proposed to wait for the current full year’s accident figures before making any firm proposals.⁶³ No proposals were ever made.* Five years later the secretary of the Cyclists’ Touring Club argued before the Alness Committee that “if rear red lamps became compulsory on bicycles the mortality among cyclists would immediately go up enormously”. (His argument was that if motorists expected to be able to see cyclists at night they would drive faster and would kill the many cyclists whose lights would, inevitably, have gone out.) He added complacently that after much argument and negotiation the reflector requirement had been arrived at as “a permanent compromise”; the motoring organisations had assured his club that they were never likely to raise the matter again, while the Minister of Transport was confident that it would not be raised by anybody for the next twenty-five years.⁶⁴ The Committee found this hard to accept and recommended that bicycles should carry rear lights.⁶⁵ Within six months of their report the war had started. Under the Emergency Regulations bicycle rear lights became compulsory, and have remained so ever since.†

The concessions made to the farmers in the 1920s, on the other hand, have survived. The 1957 Road Vehicles Lighting Act allows any horse-drawn agricultural vehicle to dispense with a rear light and to carry only one front light, and, if transporting inflammable produce in the course of “the internal operations” of the farm, to do without lights altogether.

* * * * *

Compensating people for the damage or injury caused to them by

* The figures for deaths and injuries among cyclists rose to a peak between 1934 and 1941; in 1936 the total was two and a half times what it had been in 1928.

† The cyclists resisted to the end. Their representative on the Ministry of War Transport’s Road Safety Committee in 1944 entered a solitary objection to the proposal that bicycle rear lights should be compulsory after the war.

motor vehicles can be viewed either as supplementing the attempt to regulate them or as an alternative to it. When compulsory insurance became a major issue at the end of the 1920s, the implicit view of the motoring interests was still that so much – in their view, too much – having been done to control the use made of the motor car, any injury it might do to third parties must be their fault, and that there was no case for compensating them – and least of all for requiring motorists to guarantee compensation by taking out an insurance policy. At the other extreme were those who argued that the motorist inflicted such costs on society as a whole that he should be required to compensate other road-users for any injury caused to them, no matter who was to blame. The motorist, by definition, was always in the wrong. Between these two views the government, with a cautious eye on the insurance interests, steered a discreetly middle course.

Policies for insuring motor vehicles had been available at least since the turn of the century. Probably the first motor insurance quotation ever given was issued by the Scottish Employers' Office for the Brighton Run of 1896. The first specialist motor insurance office, Car and General, was founded in 1903. The early years of the motor insurance business were confused and, from the insurers' point of view, not wholly rewarding.

Claims settlements were difficult. Car owners were rich and expected to assist an injured third party at the expense of Insurers; witnesses and juries were biased against the motorist; damage claims were hampered by lack of competent repairers; fire claims were relatively more numerous than to-day, as there were no modern safety devices.⁶⁶

After 1918, falling prices, the development of hire purchase, and growing traffic increased the number of accidents and also of drivers unable to meet third-party claims. Demands for compulsory insurance, at the very least of public service vehicles, were soon heard; in 1922 various local authorities wrote to the Ministry of Transport asking that insurance be made compulsory for all motor vehicles.⁶⁷ The Ministry of Transport had already been in touch with the commercial users, who had assured them that they knew of only two cases where a motor-owner had been unable to pay the damages awarded against him. Exactly the same argument was heard

in connection with the private motorist. In the autumn of 1924 Roads Department summed up the position:

It has been estimated that over 90 per cent of the owners of private cars are either insured against third party risks or have sufficient means to bear the expenses incurred. . . . [The notion of the motorist as a man of substance continues.] The necessity of compulsory insurance for vehicles generally does not appear to be evident. . . . It is the duty of all users of the road, including pedestrians, to avoid accidents or to protect themselves by insurance against the consequence of accidents. If some of them fail so to protect themselves it is difficult to see on what broad grounds of policy a statutory obligation could be placed on motorists.⁶⁸

They went on to argue that compulsory insurance for motor vehicles would have undesirable repercussions. It could not be restricted to motor vehicles alone, since other sorts of vehicles could and did injure people; and, to protect the public from dishonest insurance companies, the state would have to take some controls over the insurance industry.

The Ministry's public position continued to be that it would all be very difficult. But when an MP wrote to Ashley in March 1926, suggesting that the way to cover the loopholes in a system of compulsory insurance would be to make it a serious offence to drive when not insured, Ashley noted: "This letter . . . contains much sound common sense", and asked Roads Department to keep it in mind.⁶⁹ Three months later, Lord Russell introduced a private Bill to make insurance compulsory. The *Motor*, in unusually moderate vein, commented that there might be good grounds for requiring that all vehicles be insured, but that there were real difficulties (such as the danger of increased premiums if companies were forced to accept all risks, including the worst drivers) and that motorists inclined to support the Bill should think carefully before doing so.⁷⁰ Rather wilder arguments were heard in the House of Lords; it was suggested that to insure drivers would encourage them to recklessness,* and that it was wrong to force men by Act of Parliament to enter into unknown contracts. For the government, it was said that the forthcoming Road Traffic Act would require insurance for all commercial vehicles, and that 90 per cent of private motorists – the

* Presumably in the same way that compulsory rear lights for bicycles would lead to speeding at night.

same vague estimate which was often to be quoted again – were already insured.⁷¹

For once, the government statement was ahead of events. Little had yet been done in drafting provisions for compulsory insurance, and, more important, the subject had not been discussed with the main interested party, the insurance companies. These discussions began only in January 1927.⁷² The companies were deeply suspicious; their gradual acceptance of the government's proposals was made possible largely by the efforts of one of their leaders, Sir Ernest Bain, who kept in continuous informal touch with Piggott at the Ministry of Transport and effectively acted as broker between the two sides. He helped to arrange meetings between the Department and the companies, and kept the Department in touch with the companies' thinking (and doubtless *vice versa*). At the first large-scale meeting in January, the Permanent Secretary, Brooke, explained that compulsory insurance for public service vehicles was likely; it was therefore necessary to look at the question of compulsory insurance for all vehicles "in order that the Minister might be in a position to acquiesce in or resist the demands which would almost certainly be made for it". The spokesman for the Accident Offices Association said that they were in general opposed to compulsory insurance, and above all to any interference by government in the terms of contracts.

This was not very constructive, and Bain thereafter wrote to Piggott suggesting that a rather firmer line might be taken at the next meeting, with other representatives of the industry:

I think . . . when we meet the Lloyd's and Non-Tariff representatives, the position that might be submitted to them is a general one, viz.:

- (1) that the government has decided to introduce compulsory insurance so far as public vehicles are concerned. Their assistance is requested to make this workable.
- (2) it is contemplated that pressure may be brought to extend this, etc. What would their views be? and so on.

At the next meeting with the Accident Offices Association their spokesman explained that they were opposed to compulsory insurance in principle; if the government tried to apply it to all vehicles, the Association would use all their influence to oppose the Bill in Parliament. If it were limited to public service vehicles they would still be opposed to it but "would not view it with such alarm". Later, another spokesman explained that their main fear was that

once the principle of compulsory insurance were accepted it would be extended to all vehicles, and that premiums would be brought under government control. What if a future Labour government extended both the principle and the control to insurance at large?

Piggott and Bain corresponded at length about the companies' attitude. Bain's advice was to avoid all mention of the future. He agreed it was likely that private cars would have to be covered in the end, but if the companies sensed this they would become even more difficult. When the draft Road Traffic Bill was published in March 1927, it proposed compulsory insurance only for public service vehicles.

The arguments continued, with little change, for the next year and a half. The insurance brokers wrote to Ashley in the summer of 1928, declining to express a view either way about the principle of compulsory insurance but insisting that, if it were to be introduced, the Ministry of Transport would need to set up a small representative and expert committee to advise on the details of the scheme; they would gladly supply a member. The Voluntary Hospitals wrote the same month, suggesting that the growing burden of treating road accident cases made it essential for the government to insist on insurance for all drivers. Bain sent Piggott an account of the successful operation by a New Zealand company of a compulsory scheme.⁷³

By the time the Royal Commission on Transport met in the autumn of 1928, the Ministry of Transport could tell them that of all the suggestions for additional provisions in the draft Road Traffic Bill compulsory insurance was the most important and the most widely supported. Piggott, giving evidence, had to admit that it was not known how many drivers were already insured. "I think . . . everyone would agree that, if it could be done, compulsory insurance of all motor vehicles should be adopted." But it raised problems. There would have to be a register of approved companies; some public control would be necessary; if the companies were to be free to reject some bad risks, the state might have to take the responsibility of covering them; and the insurance companies were still opposed to the scheme.⁷⁴

The question of what to do about the 'bad risk' raised a central problem of principle. How far was it the inalienable right of the Englishman to drive his car on the public highway, regardless of the consequences? To require him to have insurance cover would give

the companies the power to withdraw this right. This had to be weighed against the principle involved in allowing him to drive without cover; if he did not have private means anyone injured by him would find it hard to enforce their right to adequate compensation. The official view on this changed in these months; having told the Royal Commission in November that the state might need to take on the responsibility for equipping a man to drive, Piggott in February told a Select Committee of the House of Lords that it was not the state's duty to intervene. The most it need do was to provide some system of appeal.⁷⁵ This view was put even more firmly by Shrapnell-Smith. If a man could get cover nowhere, and therefore was not allowed to drive, it would be a very good thing; "It would segregate him from the community as a very undesirable person."⁷⁶ Smith was of course speaking for the employers of professional drivers; he was supported by the T G W U, who went further in suggesting that the whole motor insurance business should be run by the government through a public corporation.⁷⁷ For the individual motorist, Stenson Cooke expressed a characteristically *laissez-faire* opinion. Starting from the view that it was absurd and prejudicial to label as 'motor accidents' incidents which were often caused by horses, cyclists or pedestrians, Cooke suggested to the Royal Commission that it was unjust to require only the motorist to take precautions through insurance. His twenty-five years at the AA had been marked by "the singling out of the motorist for special treatment, and very often special ill-treatment". Of course accidents would happen. "Life is very hard."⁷⁸

The RAC made a pretence of rationality in coming to the same conclusions. Road accidents, they suggested, fell into three groups: the unavoidable, the avoidable where a car was not responsible, and the avoidable where a car was responsible. Most accidents did not fall into the last category, and it would therefore be fair to ask the whole community to help bear the costs of the few that did, in the same way as it did with the costs of justice or of prisons. It certainly would be unfair to require all motorists to insure merely because a few of them could not meet the costs of accidents: "Why should I, a solvent motorist, insure against the insolvency of another motorist?"⁷⁹

The Scottish Club put the same points even more bluntly. It was true that hardship was caused when damages were irrecoverable, but this was one of the risks the public had to run; it was no worse

than being injured by a butcher's boy in his horse-van, and nobody had suggested that he be insured. In any case, there was a central objection of principle to the whole notion of compulsory insurance. It interfered with the liberty of the subject. "Insurance is voluntary, and there are some people who object to insurance on principle."⁸⁰

Between the insurance enthusiasts and the individualists lay a wide variety of views. The bus-owners favoured insurance, but thought that the only way of preventing private companies deciding on a man's fitness to drive was to set up a state-controlled national scheme. The Transport and General Workers broadly agreed. The Rural District Councils' Association saw no need to include private vehicles; the Urban District Councils thought that there might possibly be a case for insuring all vehicles. The burden of the evidence given by the insurance companies was ambiguous. A group of Lloyd's underwriters interested in motor insurance listed the difficulties: insurers would often rightly repudiate liability for breaches of contracts; thieves and unauthorised borrowers would always be uncovered; the forcible inclusion of drivers now black-listed would mean raising everybody's premiums; American experience suggested that compulsory insurance helped to increase accidents. What was more, things would get more, not less, difficult as motoring spread: "As motoring gets cheaper the class of driver will get worse." Very similar arguments were put forward by the Accident Offices, but when their spokesman was interviewed, a different picture emerged. In the first place, they admitted that there was already effective compulsory insurance for cars bought on hire purchase. Since finance houses insisted that such cars be insured against damage, and since British insurance practice did not allow for insurance against damage only, the purchaser had to take out third-party insurance as well. Secondly, when pressed, the Accident Offices agreed that if the worst should happen and compulsory insurance be introduced, the companies could administer it themselves. This was the first time that they had admitted that a workable scheme was compatible with the existing structure of the industry; it knocked the bottom out of the Ministry of Transport case against a scheme.⁸¹

The Lords Select Committee reported that although compulsory insurance was admirable in principle, technical factors would make it impracticable.⁸²

THE MOTOR CAR AND POLITICS: 1896-1970

But the Royal Commission, reporting the same year, disagreed.⁸³ The details of effective motor insurance still required a lot of working out (and cannot be regarded as final even today), but at least the principle that the motorist should ensure that he was able to compensate his innocent victims had at last been conceded.

I2

THE END OF THE SPEED LIMIT

The Road Traffic Act, 1930

The arguments about taxation and roads finance were more or less over by 1929. By contrast, this year at last saw positive action by the government to promote road safety. Still tougher measures were to follow in the 1930s, reflecting the fact that for the first time the casualty rate was seen as an urgent political problem.

As the Royal Commission on Transport had anticipated, they had not produced even their interim report by the time the new government took office in June 1929. But it was a government of a different party. Hurcomb, perhaps scenting landfall at last, minuted his new Minister, Herbert Morrison:

We should, I suggest, endeavour to make sure of a Bill next session and get a reference to it in the King's Speech.

You will remember that the Ministry circulated a draft Bill two years ago which attracted general support from local authorities, motoring organisations and from transport organisations of all kinds. . . . There are few questions, as reference to the daily press will show, which excite more constant and widespread interest. There can be no doubt that early legislation is required and that those parts of the Bill which relate to regulation and control of vehicles and their drivers and the safety of the roads . . . could probably be carried without difficulty. No questions of party controversy arise. The proposals would be controversial in another sense, since most members of each House will have their own particular views on such matters as the speed limit, etc. But these are points which could be left to the decision of Parliament without embarrassment to the government. It would be unwise to lay too much stress on the effect which the passage of the Bill may have in reducing liabilities to accident, but there are certain directions in which it would clearly contribute to that end. . . .¹

He made one suggestion which was to be at least as influential in getting the Bill into law as any of its own intrinsic merits: why not deal at the same time with the licensing of public service vehicles

(and try to get the reference in the King's Speech broad enough to cover this too)?

A week later Lord Cecil,* still pursuing his private campaign for road safety legislation, gave notice of his intention to ask the government their plans. Hurcomb suggested to Morrison that some evidence of plans would have to be given – "a merely evasive answer would be likely to lead to difficulty". He suggested that Morrison should ask the Cabinet for authority to give a positive reply.²

The paper which Morrison circulated to the Cabinet a few days later declared plainly that public opinion was exercised about road accidents, both because there were so many of them and because the law was so out of date. This agitation was partly responsible for the Royal Commission. The debate on Cecil's Bill had shown how strongly it was felt that legislation was overdue:

There can be little doubt if no immediate action is taken by the government on the Royal Commission's forthcoming report, Lord Cecil will introduce a fresh Bill this session and the House of Lords is likely to insist upon passing some measure and will thus throw upon the government the onus of refusing to proceed. The House of Lords frequently complain that they have nothing to do during the early part of the session, and a Bill such as this, which is entirely non-political (which, I agree, does not of necessity mean non-controversial) might with advantage be introduced in that House. . . .³

The Cabinet agreed that Cecil should be told that as soon as the Royal Commission reported, work would start on introducing a Bill.⁴

The Royal Commission reported in July 1929.⁵ Their central point was that legislation was greatly overdue. The existing law was obsolete. The 20 mph speed limit, while 'capriciously enforced' by the police, was in general probably not observed by one motorist in a thousand. Bus companies issued timetables which could not be met without breaking the limit. The absurdity of some of the law's provisions tended to bring all the others into contempt and made them harder to enforce.

The Commission were quite clear that the speed limit should be abolished. This made it all the more important that the penalties for dangerous driving should be enforced; they thought the draft Bill's attempt to create a new distinct offence of 'careless' driving would

* See page 141.

make this more difficult, because the police would be quite unable to distinguish between what was 'careless' and what was 'dangerous', and they suggested that this proposal should be dropped. They also came out in support of compulsory third-party insurance, though admitting all the difficulties. But they accepted the argument that no driving test could be effective, and agreed with the draft Road Traffic Bill that the most that could be demanded was a declaration that the applicant was not suffering from any disability. Such gaps as their proposals might leave they hoped to fill by issuing a Highway Code. They thought it very important to deal with the "antagonism between motor drivers and a section of the public". Both sides were to blame: those motorists who thought the road belonged to them, and those pedestrians who appeared to believe in their right to hold up traffic whenever they pleased. "Every effort must be made to replace this antagonism by a spirit of co-operation. We are confident that everybody on the road will play the game, but the rules of the game must be settled first."

In general, the Report endorsed the government's proposals as set out in the old Road Traffic Bill. There was thus no reason for the Ministry of Transport to hold up progress in preparing the Bill for Cabinet approval.

Little more happened before the summer recess. In the autumn, the Home Affairs Committee made no difficulty about reclassifying the Bill as 'essential', and the Cabinet endorsed this.⁶ The road safety proposals were still seen as the core of the Bill, although the Ministry of Transport hoped that it might be able to take powers to deal with the confusion of licensed bus operators. Russell, the Parliamentary Secretary, explained to Parmoor, the Lord President of the Council, that the Bill was important because it was time to bring the law up to date, because it might help to reduce road deaths, and because the licensing position needed clearing up. This last reason was relevant, Russell added, only if a new part of the Bill could be prepared in time.⁷ But in fact in a new political situation the status and emphasis of the Bill had changed in a way that made this new addition central to its success. What mattered to the Cabinet and to Morrison was tidying up the licensing situation; the earlier sections of the Bill, which for so long had been the whole of it, were now politically subordinate to the hastily drafted last part. Hurcomb minuted Piggott after a discussion with Morrison and Russell on November 1 that it would be "useless to ask the Cabinet

to allow us to introduce two separate Bills this session. . . . The licensing provisions are really more important than the rest of the Bill."⁸

The 'motoring' content of the Bill, and the significance of the motorists' views about it, were thus much less than they had been. The 1903 Act had been a *Motor Car Act*; the private motorists, as virtually the only users of motor vehicles, had been its main target and one of the major interested parties. The 1929 Bill was aimed at 'Road Traffic'; the Labour Cabinet's concern with conditions of work and with regulating road transport was reinforced by Transport officials' realisation that a composite Bill would have a much better chance of making progress than the basically 'motor car' Bill which they had been unsuccessfully pushing for so long.

Despite this, the Bill was to be regarded, by the public and in Parliament, as aimed at the motor car. It was attacked by one side as intolerably penalising the motorist, and by the other as making far too many concessions to him. The latter criticism rested largely on the abolition of the speed limit, which was widely regarded as the most interesting provision in the Bill. But several other issues came up again and again in the course of this first systematic attempt to control the motor vehicle in the interests of the community as a whole: questions of compulsory third-party insurance, of driving tests, of the penalties to be imposed, of preventing the motor car from ruining the countryside. The views which interested parties had been submitting to the Ministry of Transport ever since the war were mobilised yet again – in turn by Cecil's Bill and the Lords' Select Committee, by the Royal Commission and its report, by the publication of the Road Traffic Bill and its slow progress through Parliament.

By the time the Bill was introduced in December 1929 attitudes on the main issues were fairly clear. The speed limit was widely regarded as useless and even dangerous. The motoring organisations took the line that speed as such was not dangerous at all, that limits were hard to enforce and likely to create friction between police and public, and – an argument familiar at least since the discussions on the 1903 Act – that motorists would tend to 'drive up to' them. The Scottish club, in their evidence to the Royal Commission, ingeniously argued that since it would be dangerous to set limits at the very high levels which alone would suit motorists, and un-

workable to set them at the very low limits desired by anti-motorists, any speed limit must represent a compromise; and what was the use of a compromise?⁹

The main argument, as ever, centred on the question of how reckless drivers could be effectively prosecuted, and in particular whether provisions against dangerous driving would be adequate on their own. The Metropolitan Police in their evidence, both to the Select Committee and to the Royal Commission, displayed an agony of uncertainty about limits. They 'hated the idea' of fixed limits, which if not supported by public opinion were worse than useless, but they could not see how to do without them. They admitted sadly that, however a motoring offence was defined, prosecutions for it did not help relations between the police and public, and that a prosecution for breaking a limit depended on the objective evidence of a stop-watch, while in a dangerous driving case "the critic is the police".¹⁰ Lord Howe agreed: the speed limit should be kept – but completely revised. The commercial users and the cyclists agreed with motorists that properly enforced dangerous driving provisions would be more effective. The other police authorities were divided. Most county chief constables were against limits, most borough chief constables were for them. The local authority organisations disclaimed much interest or knowledge. The National Safety First Association admitted to having no firm views at all. It is not surprising that, when the chief constables met at the Home Office in December 1929, they should have agreed that there was no point in discussing speed limits any further, and passed on to other things¹¹; or that the Ministry of Transport should have seized with such enthusiasm on the idea of leaving the whole topic to a free vote of the Commons.¹²

But how was dangerous driving to be prevented? Giving evidence to the Royal Commission, the motorists suggested heavier penalties. The county chief constables and the National Chamber of Trade agreed; the borough chief constables thought the principle should be extended to impose heavy penalties on pedestrians, who were responsible, they suggested, for about half of all accidents. One problem, of course, was to secure convictions for dangerous driving in the first place. The Croydon police still employed traps to catch drivers speeding, and had no problems in getting convictions here; but they found local courts extremely reluctant to convict on dangerous driving charges, unless the police could provide

witnesses – and preferably independent witnesses. Even then, the fines levied were extremely low.* Other police forces disagreed on both counts. They did not use traps – largely because they took up so much police time – and had no difficulty in securing convictions for dangerous driving. This rather random assortment of evidence did not give much guide to policy-making.

On one other point, driving tests, there was surprising unanimity – against the idea. Cecil's Bill had proposed some 'test of skill', but the Select Committee had not favoured the idea. The Ministry of Transport, the Metropolitan Police and the London General Omnibus Company – who tested their own drivers – dismissed the notion of tests for private motorists. Only the Cyclists' Touring Club, TUC and TGWU – who had long been advocating driving tests as a restriction on entry to the trade – were unequivocally in favour of tests. The underwriters of Lloyd's proposed tests as an alternative to compulsory insurance; Lord Howe proposed them on a voluntary basis; another witness suggested that a system of tests could easily be administered if car dealers themselves acted as driving examiners. All the motoring organisations, and the National Safety First Association, dismissed the idea with scorn – the RAC pointing out that no tests of skill were required for holding a gun or dog licence – and suggested that a declaration of physical fitness was all that could be required.

On compulsory insurance, as already seen, the continuing public debate masked a by now wide, if reluctant, private conviction that its coming could not be long delayed.

The Bill had its Second Reading in the House of Lords on December 5.¹³ After so many years' waiting, it was an unexciting debate. Russell introduced the Bill as based on Ashley's old one, plus the comments made on it, the two reports of the Royal Commission, and subsequent work done in the Ministry of Transport. Joynson-Hicks, now disguised as Lord Brentford, hoped that the Bill would not repeat the damage done by the horsepower tax by imposing such restrictive speed limits that British manufacturers would have to build one model for home sales and one for abroad. Lord Howe asked for better regulation of pedestrians and regretted that driving tests were not required. During the committee stage, the main points of discussion were a proposal for driving tests

* The national average fine for dangerous driving in 1929 was £2. 8s. od. – in real terms, a third of the average in 1904/5.

(defeated by 57 votes to 30) and, inevitably, the speed limit. Many speakers maintained that limits 'suggested' that speeds below them were automatically safe. Brentford argued that limits brought unpopularity upon the police; Sumner warned that any attempt to keep the existing limit would run up against "the enormous driving force of the organised motoring interests, displayed through all these debates".¹⁴

The Bill passed smoothly through the Lords and emerged virtually unaltered. The most intensive and acrimonious discussions were reserved for the Commons committee stage.¹⁵ The line-up of 'the motorists' against 'the rest' was established almost at once; the first amendment moved (by Ashley) aimed to widen the scope of the first Part of the Bill to deal with *all* vehicles. Why, Ashley asked, should the provisions about careless driving not apply equally to horse-drawn vehicles (which, added Sir W. Brass, "come round corners at a very high rate of speed")?¹⁶ When another member, Beckett, criticised the Surrey police for maintaining a trap throughout the previous summer on a perfectly straight road, Morrison rebuked him: "Hon. Members must remember that it is their duty to consider the interests of the community and not any particular section." Beckett resented this, suggesting that it applied, if at all, to certain MPs representing the Pedestrians' Association.¹⁷

Again, there was much discussion of the speed limit. There had been some last-minute thoughts within the Ministry of Transport; Piggott had been uneasy, as he minuted Hurcomb in January, at fixing - "perhaps for a generation" - limits at the several levels listed in the Bill. He argued, rather vaguely, for more flexibility. Hurcomb thought it would be a mistake to hope to move limits about without a great deal of careful thought.¹⁸ But this discussion was soon overtaken by the appearance, as a practical proposal, of Piggott's favourite notion: leaving the limit to a free vote. This was suggested by Dr Salter, a Labour member and Treasurer of the London Labour party, writing on behalf of the Pedestrians' Association, Federation of Rambling Clubs, Cyclists' Union and other bodies.

Asked for his advice, Hurcomb gave Morrison a classically balanced view:

When this matter has been discussed in the H A C it has been pointed out, I think by yourself and certainly by the late Minister, that the

matter was not one on which it would be wise for the government to coerce the general feeling of the House. It seems to me a matter on which the government itself should indicate clearly what it thinks desirable and that you will therefore be bound, with the support of the Home Secretary, to urge the House to accept the proposals of the Bill. At the same time it is a matter on which it would be useless to fly in the face of general opinion and this would be a justification for not putting on the Whips. I understand that the Home Office take the same view.

On the other hand it is to be remembered that the Bill has now passed through the House of Lords which has, with practically no dissentient voices, accepted the proposals of the Bill. I should say it was undesirable, if you can avoid it, to give any indication of the attitude you will take until you speak on the Second Reading, and even then if possible it would be preferable to delay an announcement which would more properly be made when the relative clause is in committee. Apart from any question of usual procedure, is there not the risk that an intimation that you regard the question as an open one on Second Reading will give time, and indeed an argument, to any opposition to mobilise itself and bring pressure to bear on MPs?

Dr Salter could, of course, in the Second Reading debate urge his plea that the Whips should not be put on and you could say that the government would give full consideration to the matter. . . .¹⁹

Morrison had written and spoken to Salter in these terms. In the Second Reading debate, having declared that "as legislators we are not entitled to enforce and to continue speed limits which we ourselves have no intention of observing", he did not deal directly with the question of a free vote but simply hoped that the House would accept the government's recommendations and would not jump to hasty conclusions.²⁰ In committee, two speed limits were proposed: 35 mph by Salter, and 40 mph by Hall-Caine. Both were easily defeated.²¹

The other main points discussed in committee, apart from driving tests (which the House rejected, taking Morrison's heavy hint that paying so many professional examiners would be very expensive), were driving offences and penalties; insurance for the victims of motor accidents, and compensation for those who treated the victims; and the preservation of amenities against the motor vehicles. Running throughout the discussion was the theme of the motor car as a symbol of privilege. Thus a debate about how to treat drivers who were merely in, and not in charge of, their vehicles, degenerated, via a discussion of drunken drivers being chauffeured

home, into crude partisan abuse.²² An amendment which would have allowed a driver accused of being drunk to call for immediate examination by "his own, or an independent medical man" was rejected by Morrison on the grounds that it would help mainly the wealthy – an argument which in turn led to Opposition complaints of class-prejudice.²³ When a Labour member asked that two witnesses should be necessary for a careless driving conviction, Morrison turned on him with the accusation that he had "consistently taken the motorist's view the whole way through the Bill, and if he thinks that it is the Labour Party's view, I do not".²⁴

There was some discussion of penalties inside the Ministry of Transport, where Russell had picked up the suggestion made in the Lords that magistrates should be empowered to confiscate the cars of persistent offenders. Morrison was enthusiastic: "This is rather exciting, coming as it does from the Lords! Perhaps Lord Russell would draft a clause. . . ." Russell did so.²⁵ But the Home Office, invited to comment, did not like it. "A simpler plan would be the suspension of the licence of the naughty car" was the first comment on the Home Office file; the second noted that: "'Whatever moved to do the deed is deodand and forfeited' was an acceptable principle of the law in the Middle Ages, but it won't do for the twentieth century."²⁶ Replying, the Home Office pointed out that it would be inconvenient for the police to have to look after large numbers of confiscated cars, and that it might mean punishing innocent parties, as where a man had lent his car to a friend who was then convicted of an offence.²⁷ Russell was no more fortunate in a proposal that the borrowing of cars should be made an offence (which had long been demanded by the MLC). This fell down on the problem of altering the long-standing definition of 'felony'.*

The Ministry of Transport also tried to persuade the Home Office to put pressure on police and magistrates to pay more attention to offences involving the public danger, and drafted a circular which the Home Secretary might send to magistrates. This read, in part: "The police are being asked to call the special attention of the Bench to such disregard of the law as might be dangerous to the public safety so that the opportunity might be taken if the magistrates think fit of deterring drivers from this class of offence."²⁸ The Home Office pointed out that this would involve advising or

* The law was not to be changed until the passage of the Theft Act, 1968.

instructing the judiciary that instead of exercising its legal discretion it should adopt always the least lenient and severest course. This

would be altogether contrary to current practice. No Home Secretary nowadays could address any remonstrance to an individual Bench because of a particular case if it has adopted what might appear to him to be an unduly lenient course: much less would he advise or instruct Benches in general. . . . If he were to do so his action would arouse remonstrance from individual Benches, from magistrates in general and from all who are concerned to preserve proper constitutional usages in such matters.²⁹

In discussing offences generally, the House, as so often in matters connected with the motor car, was concerned less with the principles of penology than with the personal and the anecdotal. A disproportionate amount of time was spent on a discussion of which animals to include in the list of those after killing which it should be an offence not to stop. Morrison pointed out that the present Bill named horses, cattle, asses, mules, sheep, pigs, goats and dogs; it was a great improvement on the 1903 Act, which mentioned only horses. This was not enough; Members had a long list of their own suggestions, all of which were easily defeated.³⁰*

On insurance, the Ministry of Transport had had detailed negotiations with the insurance companies before the introduction of the Bill. So successful were these discussions that in debate no objections at all were made to the principle of insurance.³¹

Much more time was spent on another proposal for mitigating the damage done by the motor vehicle. Every member of the Standing Committee had been circularised by the voluntary hospitals, who pointed out that their already precarious financial position had been made worse by the difficulty of recovering the costs of

* Hartington reminded the House than when *Kismet* was on at the Haymarket a camel had walked along Jermyn Street daily; the owner, he said inaccurately, could have got no redress for damage to this valuable animal. Two other members asked to include the cat - "one of the most loved and prized of animals". Cranborne, who had not so far spoken at all, said he would like "to put in a plea for the goose and the duck". Despite Ashley's protest that "the public highway was not made for the perambulation of these animals", the catalogue continued, becoming still more fantastic. Hall-Caine insisted that "there is one animal . . . which *has* to walk along the road and ought to be protected by this Bill. That is the elephant." (One might have thought that few vehicles would be able to do anything but stop after an accident involving the death of an elephant.)

treating the victims of road accidents. What was new was not the problem itself, of the private hospital unable to turn away the penniless victim of an accident; it was the scale of the problem. The Voluntary Hospitals Commission had discussed this in a report the year before, noting that

the increasing frequency of motor accidents is placing a heavy burden on many hospitals. This charge ought not to fall upon funds derived largely from the generosity of the charitable, whose gifts are intended for the relief of persons who have not the means to provide institutional treatment at their own cost. While the evidence of a motor is very far from being evidence of affluence, those who can afford to maintain a car would suffer no hardship if by some system of compulsory insurance they were required to pay the [necessary] premium. . . .³²

Against the government's advice, the Lords had required insurance companies to pay up to £25 to hospitals treating accident victims who were later compensated under the driver's policy (and who in many cases simply left after treatment without either paying or leaving their name and address).³³ Morrison, as firmly as he dared, deprecated this provision. It was "entirely alien to this part of the Bill"; it undermined the voluntary nature of the hospitals, and it might well make their position worse, not better, if many motorists retaliated by stopping their personal contributions to hospitals. (He added, somewhat out of order, that in his view hospitals should be a public service, run by local authorities.) But if the members of the Committee should decide 'by a large majority' that the hospitals should be provided for, he would do his best, despite his many doubts, to devise a workable scheme.³⁴

The Committee did so decide. They agreed with Ashley that the clause was sound in principle, and with the many speakers who found it wrong that motorists, who were by definition relatively rich, should so often receive free treatment. (This was not in fact quite the problem: of the 164,000 people injured on the roads in 1928, nearly 100,000 were not drivers at all, but pedestrians or cyclists.) While government supporters ostentatiously abstained, the Committee voted by 20 to 10 to keep the Lords' amendment.³⁵

One other group of points, raised in the Committee, touched on a problem which in the age of mass motoring, forty years later, has still barely been tackled. The theme was the threat posed by the car to the countryside.³⁶ The Pedestrians' Association, with Lord Cecil

as their spokesman, urged that to protect the countryside it should be an offence to drive a car more than 15 yards from a road. The Ministry of Transport were sympathetic, and the government put down a new clause on the lines suggested by Cecil. (This made it clear that *parking within* 15 yards of a road was legitimate; Piggott insisted that motorists were so mistrustful of the police that unless the clause made this clear it was bound to be defeated.) The motorists objected at once. Lord Howe wrote to Russell protesting that the clause as it stood would "make potential criminals out of scores of thousands of innocent people who use their motor vehicles to go out for a little fresh air and amusement in the form of a picnic". Russell was impressed by this objection, and asked that Piggott should consult the RAC.

But this attempt to water down their proposals for keeping the car within bounds was vigorously resisted by Piggott and Hurcomb. Piggott wrote: "I do not think we could, or should, do anything to meet Lord Howe and his friends. If people want solitude for a picnic it will do them all the good in the world to leave the car by the side of the road and walk a hundred yards in search of the solitude for which their souls yearn. . . ."

Hurcomb agreed. He sent Morrison a long and eloquent essay about the car and the countryside:

It seems to me quite unreasonable that motor cars should be driven away from the highroad in order that their owners may secure pleasant conditions of solitude at the expense of the other persons who find recreation and relief in escaping from the sight and sound of mechanical vehicles, a simple pleasure in which it is becoming more and more difficult to indulge. However careful people are in the matter of leaving litter, etc., about, the penetration of woods and copses, commons etc., etc., by motor vehicles must do much to destroy amenities and wild life. It is the people who cannot and will not walk short distances who are apt to want to remove the flowers and other things they see growing and take them home with them, a practice which is becoming increasingly dangerous and will have to be checked. . . . I cannot think that any unreasonable restriction is placed upon reasonable people by what we are proposing. The clause is one of the few points on which we have been able to meet the Pedestrians' Association and I think will attract a good deal of general public support outside their ranks.

Morrison agreed, and the clause was passed.³⁷ It is still on the statute book.

None of these arguments, nor the long debate on the other parts of the Bill, were enough to obstruct the Bill's slow passage through the Commons. By the end of July it was through. In his final speech, Morrison suggested that abolishing the speed limit would probably not in itself affect existing practice on the roads. He appealed, as Ministers of Transport had so often done before him and would do again, to the police and magistrates vigorously to enforce the law,* and to the motoring public "to co-operate with the authorities in a friendly way, and voluntarily to take every possible care to reduce the accidents upon the highway".³⁸

The appeal was familiar, but the circumstances at least were not. It was over ten years since Geddes had asked the Departmental Committee to think about bringing road traffic law up to date; it was nearly twenty-five since the Royal Commission on Motor Cars had recommended the abolition of the speed limit. Now at last the recommendations of the Commission and the Committee were embodied in the law. The long delays had been the result in part of the irresolution of an executive lacking both the technical expertise and the political will to overcome the objections of the many outside interests, in part of the low status of the Ministry of Transport, which had been left at times without its own Minister and for years with Ashley, conscientious but politically very much the gentleman-amateur. Ashley's own explanation of the delay was that the Ministry of Transport, having been allowed to introduce the Electricity (Supply) Bill (of which the committee discussions took up over 1,500 columns of *Hansard* in the spring of 1926), could not be given time for another major measure during the same Parliament.³⁹

The delays were finally brought to an end partly by the mere passage of time – by 1929 there were few interested parties, if any, who had not been consulted at least once about the draft Bill – partly by the alarming growth of the road accident problem, which at last gave some political weight to the efforts of critics such as Cecil, partly also by the appointment to Transport, for the first time ever, of a Minister who, though young, was not only both ambitious and experienced politically, but was interested in and well informed about traffic and transport problems. Morrison also had the advantage over his country-gentleman predecessor – given that traffic

* The Bill raised the maximum penalty for a first dangerous driving offence to £50 or four months, for subsequent offences to £100 and/or four months. For the new offence of careless driving, the maxima were £20 and £50 or three months.

problems were at their worst in London – of being himself a Londoner.

The improvement in the political situation should not obscure the importance of the tactics used by Morrison and his officials; the Bill appealed to him, and in turn to his colleagues, because it dealt not only with road safety but also with public transport. In the notes for the broadcast which he gave on the Bill, he devoted only one of fourteen separate points to the public transport parts of the Bill, but made his feelings clear: "Establishment of an ordered system of public vehicles: a matter of less general interest to the public at large, but in many ways the most important part of the Act."⁴⁰

But one weakness of the Act was precisely that it had taken so long to bring it about. For the private motor car its central feature was the abolition of the speed limit. Established by the 1903 Act, the 20-mph limit had almost immediately been outdated by technical developments, as the Royal Commission on Motor Cars had recognised in proposing its abolition after only three years. It seems not to have occurred to anyone on the official side* that the proposed abolition might itself, twenty-four years later, be equally out of date.

* Except possibly Piggott; cf. page 255, above.

13

MIDDLE-CLASS KILLERS

Private motoring in the 1930s

The post-war tide of new cars had reached its peak in 1925, which had seen the largest increase yet (106,000), in the car population, bringing the total number of cars to 580,000 and the total of motor vehicles of all kinds to a million and a half, including half a million motor cycles. After 1925, the growth rate fell off every year until 1931. There was an equally steady fall in visitors to the Motor Show: these reached a peak of 275,000 in 1927, then fell till 1932 (185,000).

None of this was surprising in mid-slump. The industry itself assumed that the trend was a permanent one. In 1927, the SMMT, perhaps inspired by much press comment on the same subject, made some elaborate calculations of the cost of keeping a car, the income necessary to meet such a cost, and the consequent prospects for car ownership. Excluding as potential car-owners agricultural workers, insured workers of all kinds, domestic servants and the like, they took the basic car-owning class to be about one third of income-tax payers. From this they deduced that the existing 674,000 cars might grow to a maximum of just over a million.¹ A year later, with annual registrations still falling, the *Economist* suggested that "the time is past when any startling increase in annual registrations may be expected", and that a vigorous and intelligent sales campaign might produce an increase in new car sales of 20,000 a year.² The same paper's considered view, expressed in its *Commercial History and Review of 1928*, was that "the idea of personal ownership as a luxury must be abandoned if the full benefits of motor transport development are to be developed in this country."³

However, things were not yet as bad as the industry had feared. The worst was, in fact, already past. In 1929 (with annual registrations still falling but with nearly a million cars already in use) the SMMT cautiously revised their estimate of saturation point to a million and a quarter. From 1932 sales began to pick up again, at an

ever-increasing rate. The *Economist* expressed astonishment at the resistance of the motor industry to the depression.⁴ There were a million and a quarter cars – ‘saturation point’ – on British roads by 1934; by the time the war began there were over two million.

One major reason for the continuing demand for cars was the steady fall in the cost of motoring. New car prices, which by 1928 were less than half what they had been in 1920, were to fall by a further third by 1938; the cost of running a car also fell throughout the whole inter-war period.* No other single group of household expenditure fell so far between the wars. (Both these changes reflected the shift from larger to smaller cars. In 1925 cars of 10 hp and under had made up 25 per cent of total sales; by 1938 their share was 60 per cent.) Distribution of cars, and of the problems which they caused, still varied widely between different parts of the country, as it was to continue to do. In 1927, per 1,000 population, there were 23 cars in Cambridgeshire, 17 in London, 11 in Lancashire, 7.7 in Monmouth and 5.8 in Durham. Throughout the whole period, about a quarter of all the cars in Britain were registered in the counties of London, Middlesex, Kent, Surrey and Essex.† But even in London, where traffic congestion was a problem, it was caused less by private cars than by horse-drawn vehicles, buses and lorries. Private cars contributed to congestion by being unsystematically parked, despite official attempts to concentrate parking in authorised places; in 1927, the London and Home Counties Traffic Advisory Committee noted that motorists preferred to leave their cars on the street rather than use available garage space (a problem vastly worse forty years later).

In general, there was no reason to suggest that the motor car should not be allowed to go wherever it physically could. For a brief period in the 1920s the Ministry of Transport, in prophetic mood, had let fall some hints about the undesirability of allowing private motor transport to interfere with public. The implication that it might be necessary to ‘interfere’ with motorists led the *Motor* to indignant reference to Soviet Russia, and to the statement that no business motorist “is likely for a moment to tolerate any restriction of his rights to the free legal use of the roads which are the nation’s

* The average price of a car has been estimated as £684 in 1920, £279 in 1930 and £210 in 1938; and of petrol per gallon as 3s. 9d., 1s. 5d. and 1s. 6d. respectively.⁵

† The proportion was still the same in the late 1960s.

property and towards the use of which he pays heavily by way of special taxation.”⁶ But as yet there was no need for such action. Roads, though dangerous, were well-surfaced and uncongested. Modern cars, freed from the speed limit and the police trap, could average high speeds over long distances. The 1930s were perhaps the classic period of motoring as a middle-class occupation. It was still relatively expensive. Although wages were stable in the decade from the mid-1920s, while car prices were falling, they were stable at a fairly low level; the average adult male wage in these years was about £3. Motorists *were* middle-class; a survey carried out by the AA after the war suggests that at least half of those who had owned cars before 1939 were – at least by the time of the survey – members of the ‘AB’ group.⁷ The AA, run on autocratic lines by Stenson Cooke – he used regularly to address the whole staff on an internal public address system – was officially conceded to be respectable when Cooke himself was knighted in 1933. It was noticeable that when in 1938 Ellen Wilkinson introduced her Hire Purchase Bill, which protected instalment buyers against unscrupulous repossession, she set the upper limit of individual articles covered by the Bill at £50, thus excluding motor cars. When the working class could afford to go on holiday, they went by rail or, if by road at all, crammed into coaches. (The 1930s were the golden age not only of the private motor car, but also of the motor bus.) Occasionally, it is true, the workers used the roads for other purposes; they marched in protest against unemployment; and the place of the motor car in the society of the early 1930s is, perhaps, hinted at in the 1930 report of the Ministry of Health’s Departmental Committee on the Relief of the Casual Poor: “We are in full agreement with the view expressed by the Departmental Committee of 1904 . . . that the habit of vagrancy is much encouraged . . . by the prevalence of indiscriminate alms-giving, including its modern manifestation the offer of free ‘lifts’ in motor cars.”⁸

These facts and attitudes lay behind the furious arguments about the only aspect of the car which in these years divided the political parties: their use at elections.⁹ The Labour Party claimed, as they were still to be claiming thirty years later, that the unregulated use of cars to carry voters to the polls could favour only the Tories. A Bill was introduced by a Labour back-bencher in 1925, seeking to ban any use of cars at elections. It was defeated, but five years later the Labour members of the Ullswater Committee on electoral

reform, laying down the conditions on which they would agree to the Liberal demand for the 'alternative vote', made one of these a ban on cars unless supervised by the returning officer. In 1930 the Labour government's Electoral Reform Bill proposed a similar ban; this was justified in the Second Reading debate as necessary to deprive the Conservatives of their unfair advantages, and attacked as unenforceable and liable to cause hardship, if not virtual disfranchisement, in country districts. Under pressure, the government admitted that their proposals were unworkable. As it emerged from the Commons, the Bill would have allowed each candidate one car for every thousand voters, except in the fifty-odd constituencies of more than 400 square miles. The House of Lords struck out the clause altogether; the Bill made no further progress before the government fell.

At this time, there probably was something in the Labour argument. When another Bill was brought in (unsuccessfully) in 1938, Mr Acland contrasted the 40 cars available to him at the 1935 election with the 200 used by his Tory opponent.¹⁰ In some areas the number of Tory cars (and thus probably their advantage over their opponents) was much greater; Wilfred Ashley noted that in 1929 he had been lent 585 cars, in 1931, 767.¹¹

But these partisan arguments were the exception. The most striking feature of motoring in the early 1930s, and the main problem caused by motor vehicles, was one on which the parties, as always in the past, had no distinctive points of view. This was the rise in road casualties. By 1934 they had reached unprecedented levels. The total figure for dead and injured in 1934 was 239,000; this was not exceeded, in peacetime, until 1955. The figure for deaths alone was, in retrospect, even more startling. In 1934 road deaths totalled 7,343. This figure was not exceeded in peacetime until 1964 – when there were over five times as many vehicles on the roads. Road safety was now the subject of major and recurrent concern that it has been ever since. What was more, this problem centred on the private motor vehicle. In 1933, motor cars and motor cycles were held responsible for 60 per cent of fatal accidents; in 1938, the proportion was 80 per cent.¹²

Road safety became the public's business partly as the result of some active lobbying. The most prominent organisation in the field was the Pedestrians' Association, founded and presided over by Lord Cecil. His interest, as he explained, arose from the impres-

sion he had received during the Select Committee and the debates on his own Bill that the power of the motoring organisations was out of all proportion to that of their unorganised victims.¹³ The Association's main aim was to reduce road casualties, especially among pedestrians.*

It commented in October 1933, that "the Ministry of Transport has permitted to be unleashed on the roads forces of destruction which it is beyond the powers of the police to control".¹⁴

The powers of the police to control these forces were a function of the willingness of the judiciary to use the weapons with which the 1930 Act had equipped them. A solicitor, writing in 1929, commented that motoring offenders were tried by inexperienced lay magistrates, often old and prejudiced, on the basis of capricious prosecutions and sometimes biased evidence from the police. He added that the middle-class – and sometimes even upper-class – motorists had at last discovered how the courts really worked.¹⁵ But in fact, although JPs were indeed criticised in this context, it was, as it had been ever since the early 1900s, not only the defendants, but also the spectators who were critical, and not of the magistrates' knowledge or ignorance of the law, but of their manifest prejudices in favour of the motorist. the Pedestrians' Association assiduously collected examples of the refusal of the bench to regard even the most serious offences as more than technicalities. Pedestrians tended to blame every accident on the motorists; the motorists, where they could, blamed the pedestrians. The courts often agreed with the motorists; the Pedestrians' Association quoted with horror a remark by the coroner at the inquest on a woman of eighty-six who had been knocked down by a car: "Old ladies who go about like this may cause any amount of danger to other people. In trying to avoid them, motorists and cyclists may find themselves in difficulties."¹⁶

Motorists could still find examples of what they considered draconian and openly anti-motorist attitudes in some courts; the few surviving police traps were usually associated with a local bench bent on exacting heavy fines. But most public discussion concerned the bench's laxity. Mr Justice Goddard, whose severity towards motoring offenders was to become celebrated, told the grand jury at Maidstone Assizes in June 1932 that where there was any real

* Chaired by its original Secretary, Mr T. C. Foley, it was still in existence in 1970.

suggestion of careless or negligent driving, magistrates should exercise their powers 'rigorously and firmly'.¹⁷ The following month, after a debate in the Lords in which it was widely agreed that magistrates were failing to exercise their powers, the Home Secretary sent a circular to all magistrates and chief officers of police in England and Wales. Enclosing the latest casualty figures, it suggested that the existing law, if effectively enforced, was probably sufficient to check offences, and reminded magistrates of their powers of suspension.¹⁸ It was suggested in the press that in sending this circular the executive was unduly interfering with the judiciary; but interference must be judged by its effects, and the effects of the circular were so negligible that another was sent out eighteen months later.¹⁹

The Home Office did this only with great reluctance. They were prepared to press the magistrates once, but they felt that repeated exhortations might well constitute 'interference'. They argued that a second circular would be quite contrary to constitutional principle, and would create "a most awkward precedent". If it were claimed that road accidents were a problem so serious as to justify exceptional measures, "the same argument might well be used by some future Government as an excuse for pressing Courts to deal in a particular way with particular types of defendant who seemed specially noxious to the Minister concerned. Considerations of expediency [are] against creating such a precedent."

Their way out of this difficulty was to suggest in the second circular simply that magistrates should consider the problem and give the Home Secretary the benefit of their advice on the best solution. The circular (which began "As you are no doubt aware, what is known as the 'toll of the road' has for long been giving the Government serious concern") reproduced the 1933 casualty figures, compared them with the 1932 figures, pointed out how few serious motoring offenders had their licences suspended, and ended by asking whether disqualification should be available for penalties other than dangerous or careless driving.²⁰ It is perhaps not surprising that this delicately oblique approach was ineffective; the Home Office, overcoming their scruples, sent out two more circulars in the next two years.

By the end of 1932 even the motoring correspondent of the *Daily Express*, reviewing the latest sports cars, could conclude that the whole situation would have to be closely watched. "We may yet return to a maximum speed limit probably in the neighbourhood

of 60 mph.”²¹ In the autumn the Pedestrians’ Association wrote to all MPs, proposing that a Parliamentary group be formed on the subject of road safety. About 120 MPs asked to be kept in touch; a meeting in December resolved to create a committee of both Houses “for the purpose of considering questions affecting the general public in relation to the use of the roads”. The following spring this group asked the Home Secretary to circularise the justices again.²²

The rise in road accidents produced demands for action not only to deal with their causes, but also to mitigate their effects. In the spring of 1932 Lord Danesfort introduced a Bill to enable those injured in motor accidents (where they were not to blame) to be compensated by the driver’s insurance company, even when the driver was not to blame.²³ The government spokesman on transport matters in the Lords, Plymouth (who combined this task with being Parliamentary Secretary to the Colonial Office), asked the Ministry of Transport for comments. His own view was that if the Bill were to be rejected, the initiative should come not from the government but from the motoring organisations.²⁴

In the Department, Piggott took a liberal view. The whole question bristled with difficulties; the obvious objections to the Bill were that it would lead to increased premiums and so would penalise the large majority of careful motorists and favour the small minority who caused accidents (the argument which had been used by the opponents of the whole principle of compulsory insurance). This once said, Piggott thought it would be difficult to resist the introduction of the Bill; there was much to be said for letting the onus rest on the motorist to show that he could not have avoided the accident. But he was alone in his opinions, which in due course were over-ruled by his colleagues’ insistence that Danesfort’s proposals would lead to more trouble than they were worth.²⁵

After discussions between Plymouth, Danesfort and Piggott, Danesfort reintroduced his Bill, slightly amended, the following February. The House of Lords voted to refer it to a Select Committee.²⁶ Piggott himself (reluctantly, at Hurcomb’s request) gave the Department’s evidence to the Committee. He told them that the Government had concluded that they could not help with the passage of a proposal

which, while aimed at removing one kind of hardship, creates another, and which will impose on careful motorists in circumstances

in which they were quite innocent of blame or responsibility, the liability to pay damages. . . . It is of course for Parliament to balance the hardships or grievances of the one side against the hardships and the question of principle on the other, but for their part the government cannot advise the House to proceed with this particular measure.²⁷

The Select Committee reported in July 1933, with some reservations about the details of the Bill but with general approval for its principle. Officials in Transport were still unenthusiastic, but prepared, if Ministers insisted, to follow the Committee's advice. Headlam, the Parliamentary Secretary, saw positive advantages in action; in terms very like those in which Cecil's Bill had been discussed five years before, he argued that public opinion was exercised at the large number of accidents and that the House of Lords – which seemed to take the problem more seriously than the Commons – would go on agitating unless some action were taken. He suggested that Stanley should propose to the Cabinet that the Bill should be left to a free vote on Commons Second Reading, and should then go to committee.²⁸

Stanley did not like the idea of a free vote, the panacea in this field: "We must show whether we want the Bill or not and if we do want it, then we ought to get it passed. But I think a [Cabinet] memorandum . . . would assist us in making up our own minds."²⁹ There is no sign that it did. It cannot have been easy for Stanley's colleagues to tell from the paper which he circulated (drafted by Godsell, considerably altered by Stanley himself) what he really thought about the Bill. He suggested that it would not reduce accidents; indeed, if it made motorists feel that the consequences of their negligence would always be taken care of by the insurance companies, it might actually increase them. It would lead to increased premiums. It would be opposed in the House of Commons and strongly resisted by the motoring organisations. Finally, it would represent a complete departure from the general principles of the law; this, Stanley suggested, was the most formidable objection to the Bill, and the only one which gave adequate grounds for rejecting it. An opinion from the Attorney-General was attached:

It seems a remarkable proposition that motor insurers are to take on the liability of insuring pedestrians against Acts of God and inevitable accidents in which motor vehicles are involved. . . . It may

be wise to have all pedestrians insured against such Acts of God or inevitable accidents but I see no reason why one section of the public should be asked to bear the expense.³⁰

But Stanley's paper leaves a distinct impression that he had failed to deal centrally with the problem raised by the Bill – namely, that it had identified a problem which could not be wished away by the kind of objections put forward by Stanley. Some of these were simply irrelevant, such as the suggestion that the Bill would not reduce accidents. Piggott, at least, was unconvinced; he noted on Stanley's Cabinet paper that it dismissed the Bill "in too summary a fashion", and that there were good arguments for at least shifting the onus of proof between the motorist and the injured non-motorist.³¹

For the moment no further action was taken. But there had meanwhile been developments on another Bill brought forward by a peer, once again designed to mitigate the effects of motor accidents – for the benefit this time not of the victims, but of those who treated them. The provisions which the Lords had inserted in Morrison's Bill had not solved the problem of the unmet costs of voluntary hospitals and individual doctors. Insurance companies were no more eager to pay these than the motorists had been. The British Medical Association estimated that doctors were paid in only one case out of five; in 1931, 25,000 motor accident victims were treated as in-patients in voluntary hospitals at a total cost of nearly a quarter of a million pounds; payments received from the insurance companies under the 1930 Act amounted to only £35,000. Nor did the Act make any provision for the costs of treating out-patients.³²

This cause was taken up by Lord Moynihan, himself a former President of the Royal College of Surgeons. In March 1933 he had suggested that all the insurance companies should contribute to a fund out of which doctors should be paid.³³ In May he brought in a Bill to allow any hospital or general practitioner who had treated the victim of a motor accident to recover a maximum of three guineas from the owner of any motor vehicle involved.³⁴ It was referred to the same Select Committee as Danesfort's. Officials in Transport were not greatly impressed by the Bill. Hurcomb told Stanley that although the small hospital and the general practitioner living on a main road did undoubtedly have a grievance, the notion of a 'levy' should not be encouraged. Stanley disagreed,

liking the 'levy' proposal and wanting to have it given further thought.³⁵

This original division of opinion within the Department was to last throughout the discussions of the Bill. Officials saw and sympathised with the doctors' and hospitals' difficulties, but they felt that to legislate specifically for these would be politically unsound and would set a dangerous precedent. Stanley was determined to bring under control all kinds of nuisance caused by the motor car, and had no objection to offending motorists or to setting precedents. For the time being, the civil service view prevailed. The Ministry of Transport told the Select Committee that the Bill was crude, and a departure from the accepted principles of jurisprudence. They also doubted whether it would succeed in its object:

Human nature being what it is, it seems likely that in many cases the owner of the motor vehicle would entirely ignore an account for 15 shillings or 20 shillings received from a doctor he knew nothing about, particularly if the owner . . . felt that he was not in any way responsible for the accident.

The Ministry suggested that to create a pool for compensating doctors, to be financed by an increase in the licence fee, might be counter-productive; motorists resenting the increased fee might feel justified in reducing any voluntary payments which they made to doctors and hospitals. In an attempt to be constructive, they advised that it might be best to levy a flat-rate fee, equivalent to the average expenses incurred by a doctor or hospital.³⁶

The Select Committee supported this proposal, and when the Bill was republished in the autumn it provided for a flat-rate fee of 12s. 6d. and travelling expenses. But for the moment the Ministry of Transport had gone as far as they could. They felt that although "some of the more obvious objections" to the Bill had been met, it still would not do. Although the Lords gave it a Second Reading, Plymouth made it very clear that there would be no time for it in the Commons.³⁷ Stanley told the Cabinet shortly after this that the Bill was "unsound in principle and unjust in operation".³⁸ However, he was asked to prepare a memorandum setting out the reasons for this view.³⁹ By the time he came to do so, Moynihan had been in touch with Plymouth, asking if Stanley could really do nothing to deal with the problem: "A mere apathetic 'non-possumus' will excite anger throughout the Profession which, almost for the first

time, seems to have no difference of opinion among its members." Plymouth wrote to Stanley, pointing out that the Lords had agreed that there was a real grievance to be dealt with, that Lord Howe would probably put down an amendment proposing to finance a scheme out of the Road Fund, and asking to be allowed to say something more constructive during the committee stage "as peers undoubtedly feel strongly upon it".⁴⁰

All this was in line with Stanley's personal opinion, and the memorandum which he put to his colleagues was very different in tone from the official drafts he had circulated earlier. Having argued that it would be unfair to ask the motoring community as a whole to pay the costs incurred by the callous behaviour of a few, and having dismissed the possibility of contributions either from the Exchequer or the Road Fund, he nonetheless concluded that Parliamentary feelings on the matter were so strong that if the government put forward no proposals of its own, "amendments on the lines of Lord Moynihan's Bill are almost certain to be inserted in any legislation that may be introduced". He therefore "reluctantly recommended that it would be best to incorporate Moynihan's proposals in his own forthcoming Road Traffic Bill."⁴¹

The Cabinet were clearly somewhat taken aback at this abrupt change in tactics, and for once refused to accept that it might be necessary to give way to pressure. Having agreed that Danesfort's proposals were still not practicable,* they expressed doubts about adopting Moynihan's: "it might be preferable to wait and see whether the demand for the incorporation of these provisions was as strong as now appeared to be the case." Stanley was asked to think further about the whole problem.⁴²

His suggestion of sweeping up Moynihan's proposals in his own Bill was not a mere delaying device. This Bill was by now well advanced, having been prepared with a speed and sense of purpose unprecedented in the history of road traffic legislation. Earlier in the year Stanley had asked his department to collect systematic statistics about road casualties, as a guide to the action needed. By autumn, the figures for the first six months of the year were in his hands. They showed that of nearly 3,500 fatal accidents involving

* Danesfort's Bill was finally debated the following June. No new points were raised on either side. It was given a Second Reading by 19 votes to 14, but the government had already made it quite clear that they would give it no encouragement, and it made no further progress.⁴²

motor vehicles, private cars and motor cycles had been concerned in 2,000. Of these, 38 per cent were said to have taken place at a speed of under 20 mph, only 3½ per cent at over 40 mph.⁴⁴

The Department was able to act quickly because it largely avoided the paralysing processes of consultation, whether with other departments or with outside interests, which had delayed earlier Bills for so long. The Metropolitan Police, for instance, were shown an early draft, and found it rather severe. Hurcomb sent Stanley an account of a conversation he had had with the Commissioner, Lord Trenchard. Trenchard's view was that the government "would be well advised to take as few steps as possible at the present stage, and that it would be preferable that public opinion should bring pressure for further steps to be taken rather than that drastic action should antagonise public opinion."⁴⁵ This view perhaps had something to be said for it, given that Trenchard wanted the police to be given powers to prosecute pedestrians who did not use authorised crossing-places. It also reflected a hallowed principle of road traffic legislation. But Stanley noted curtly in the margin: "The public reaction will be that we are not doing enough", and took no notice.⁴⁶ A week later he submitted his proposals to the Cabinet.⁴⁷

In his memorandum, Stanley expressed concern at the high rate of road accidents, and added that in recent months public opinion had been clamouring for action. He had thought it necessary to wait for the figures. From these he concluded, with a simple realism which again few previous discussions of the subject had shown, that "there is no single cause to which accidents can be exclusively or indeed predominantly attributed". There was thus no single remedy. Government, police, courts, highway authorities and road-users themselves would have to co-operate.

He then concisely listed his proposed remedies. A speed limit should be reintroduced, but not a general one, which experience had shown to be impossible to enforce and unnecessary on the open road; 30 mph seemed a reasonable level. He went on to propose driving tests, pedestrian crossings, prohibition of inefficient bicycle reflectors, and widespread propaganda (although aiming to rely mainly on the goodwill of leader-writers and the services of the BBC, to avoid expense). He hoped that the Home Secretary's recent circular to magistrates might encourage them to impose higher penalties.

Stanley's colleagues accepted his proposals with little comment.

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It was pointed out that the speed limit could be enforced only by mobile police patrols, and that these would cost money. It was suggested that further pressure might be put on the courts, but objected that to do more than send circulars would endanger the proper relationship between the executive and the judiciary. Later, there was some discussion of how best to define the 'built-up areas' which would be subject to speed limits. It was suggested that the definition might be "rather hard on motorists". This was familiar enough. "Generally speaking, however, the *unanimous* [my italics] view of the Cabinet was that these measures were desirable in order to put a check on reckless driving."⁴⁸ This was a new boldness. Never before had a government so deliberately resolved that, however the motorists might protest, their protests should be disregarded in the interests of public safety.

Two and a half months after the Cabinet had agreed to the Bill in principle, it was ready. The Home Affairs Committee passed it almost without comment. The next day, the Cabinet rubber-stamped their approval.⁴⁹ The Bill had had an unprecedentedly easy birth. Much of this was due to the personality of Stanley. Only a few years before, with Ashley at Transport and Joynson-Hicks at the Home Office, the mere threat of objections from the police had been enough to stop all progress on the draft Road Traffic Bill. The police were not entirely happy with Stanley's Bill. They had wanted to see the minimum age for motor-cycle licences raised from sixteen to seventeen. Many of them were opposed to restoring the speed limit; Hurcomb was told at a conference of chief constables, the same day that the HAC discussed the draft Bill – which in itself implies a certain lack of concern for the substance of their views – that it would create congestion and would put the police "back in the unpleasant position of having a speed limit which will be unenforceable in practice". They also suggested that courts, where a charge of dangerous driving had been dismissed, should have the power to reduce the charge to one of careless driving with the aim of securing a conviction. At Hurcomb's suggestion that he would need the support of the Home Secretary in Parliament, Stanley sent him a conciliatory letter; but he made no promises.⁵⁰

Public comment, although mixed, was in general more favourable. An unofficial summary of the Bill was sent out to the press. The *Telegraph* trotted out the ancient cry that any speed was dangerous, and condemned the new limit as retrograde; the answer, it

suggested, lay in more prosecutions for grossly careless driving and more severe sentences on conviction. The *Morning Post* thought the Bill needed strengthening. The *Manchester Guardian*, anticipating criticism of the Bill, suggested that its opponents would be unable to make any better proposals for reducing the casualty rate. The *Economist* felt that it filled the obvious gaps left by the 1930 Act. The *Times* and *Observer* approved. So did the *Autocar*, which said boldly that road accidents required further unpleasant restrictions, and motorists would cheerfully make their fair share of sacrifices. The *Motor* alone struck an authentically 'motorist' note, complaining that the Bill applied "more shackles to the motorist. . . . In a word, it is unnecessary." It went on to argue that the Bill represented a surrender to anti-motoring forces, creating more offences and more penalties among a class who already paid millions of pounds in excessive taxation. Driving would become more complicated and more difficult, and driving tests would not get the dangerous drivers off the road.⁵¹ The Pedestrians' Association welcomed it: "a big advance on any previous government action to safeguard the public in the use of the roads".⁵²

In the Commons, Stanley took a strong no-nonsense line in introducing the Bill.⁵³ This was an ideal subject for a Commons debate, he declared, uncomplicated by party lines. There was "no great political issue involved in this question. You may be a good Tory and believe in tests for drivers." What was more, "all the facts are available to all of us".

Propaganda, Stanley went on, was not enough; the results must be reinforced by other and more permanent measures. He applauded Herbert Morrison's courage in abolishing the speed limit, and agreed that a general limit was impracticable. But the hopes of 1930 about the effects of abolishing it had proved largely false (although its reimposition implied no censure on the motorists). On driving tests, it was quite true that the reckless driver might well pass a test and be allowed on to the road with all his faults. "But he is on the road now." Pedestrian crossings would be voluntary to start with. If they succeeded in saving people's lives - "even against their own will" - he would not hesitate to make them compulsory. In all, Stanley made perhaps the most sensible, tough-minded and articulate speech on road safety and its enforcement since the subject had become one of public concern. For the first time, a leading politician made it plain not merely that he disapproved of road

accidents, but that he was determined to act to reduce them and would do so despite 'infringements of individual liberty'.

Most of the rest of the debate was not up to this standard. The leading speech for the official Opposition was feeble and confused, failing to deal with some of the important points and to understand others (thus the speaker confused the notion of a *maximum* penalty with that of a *minimum*). A moderate speech by Isaac Foot, who suggested that in accident cases the onus should always be on the driver, was greeted by Moore-Brabazon with the comment that Foot was obviously "an anti-motorist. I have been motoring long enough to have been slashed in the face by people with whips. . . . I am surprised that such people still survive." Taking up a line of attack which was to be repeated over thirty years later, he suggested that the faults of Stanley's Bill were due to the fact that its author was not a motorist, but a mere railway director. The speed limit would merely encourage motorists to drive up to it. In any case, what was the point of such concern over 7,000 road deaths a year? "Over 6,000 people commit suicide every year, and nobody makes a fuss about that."

The rest of the debate was the usual *mélange* of over-emphatic and unargued points. The gratitude of the community at large, and the hostility of the motoring organisations, were prophesied. The Bill was criticised as too severe, and as full of loopholes. It was argued that driving tests had been condemned by the Departmental Committee in 1919, and the speed limit by the Royal Commission five years ago: what had changed in either case? In all, it was the kind of debate which had already been held perhaps twenty times on the subject, and which was to be repeated even more often in the future.

Throughout the committee stage the same familiar arguments recurred.⁵⁴ Few new points were made. The motorist/non-motorist division was exemplified by an exchange between two back-benchers early on in the discussion of Clause 1, which imposed the speed limit (and which generated over 250 columns of Hansard, occupying seven separate sittings):

Sir W. L. Mitchell: "Is one who has never driven a motor car not qualified to give an opinion on anything that comes before the Committee, or has he to submit to dictation from one or two men who are notorious for speed driving?"

Sir W. Brass: "I resent very much the suggestion that I am

notorious for speed driving. Obviously, those who have had any experience in driving cars and in braking efficiency can give very much better practical advice than people who merely sit in cars and are driven about."⁵⁵

Despite Brabazon's complaint that he had been rushed into imposing the speed limit by the press, Stanley firmly refused to allow a free vote on it. He suggested that those MPs who had objected to the limit spoke not for the three million licence-holders who drove short distances at low speed, but for "a small class of owners of powerful, well-looked after cars of great braking capacity". In general, Stanley was firm with suggestions that the limit be relaxed, but he accepted, reluctantly, a back-bench amendment suspending it between midnight and 5 a.m. He also agreed to regard it as an experiment, and that unless renewed it should last only until December 31, 1939. He deprecated criticism of, and on behalf of, motorists; it could lead only to class-feeling among road-users, which was silly and dangerous.* In support of the limit he effectively quoted his own department's statistics, which showed that many collisions in built-up areas happened on the widest – and thus the fastest and least congested – roads.⁵⁷

Nothing in the Bill aroused such interest as the speed limit. Even the clause introducing the driving test passed with no discussion of its principle (although it was suggested that any test should include 'psychophysical' tests of fitness to drive).⁵⁸ Where Stanley had no strong views, the interests still prevailed: an amendment to require cyclists to carry rear lamps made its customary appearance, but was attacked as imposing "a very heavy charge" on cyclists who would have to pay 4½d. for batteries. Stanley accepted the criticism, and hoped that requirements for standardised reflectors would be enough.⁵⁹ Again, when a minor amendment moved at the Home Office's request was hotly attacked in committee, Stanley agreed to withdraw it for the time being while he discussed it with the Home Office. After some thought the Home Office told the Ministry of Transport that they had decided to let it drop – "because we do not at present feel able to make out so strong a case

* A sentiment shared by Stenson Cooke, who wrote to *The Times* in July deprecating the fomenting of 'class hate' and a 'spirit of antagonism' as the result of prejudiced statements by public men, the introduction of anti-motoring legislation, and the frequent publication of figures of 'motor' accidents.⁶⁰

as to justify pressing it on what might prove to be an unwilling House".⁶⁰

The principle of Moynihan's Bill had reappeared in a new clause proposing that where a motor vehicle – or a 'motor car', as the mover revealingly put it – had caused injury, the owner should pay 12s. 6d. to doctor or hospital towards the cost of treatment, regardless of whether or not he was to blame. The Ministry of Transport had in fact earlier discussed this proposal both with its medical promoters and with the insurance interests. The latter had no overriding objections, and the Department agreed to tidy up the amendments to be moved, although not promising to accept them.⁶¹

In the debates Stanley did his best to resist the proposal. He argued that to make motorists liable whether or not they were to blame, was to attack them as a class. This would make it impossible to create among them the spirit necessary to improve their behaviour. If the hospitals valued the voluntary contributions which they already received from motorists, they would do better to aim for real co-operation with motorists rather than try to tax them. He managed to persuade the House not to require motorists to contribute to the expenses of voluntary ambulance associations, nor (a proposal moved by spokesmen for the motorists) to extend these arrangements to the victims of horse-drawn vehicles. But despite his obvious impatience with it, the clause as a whole was decisively passed.^{62*}

But if the anti-motorists had scored some points, so too had the motorists. Headlam, opening for the government in the debate on Third Reading, went out of his way to suggest that the amendments made to the speed-limit provisions "materially improved them for motorists": the limit was to expire in 1939 unless renewed, was to be suspended at night, and might be altered by the Minister subject only to an affirmative resolution of both Houses.⁶⁴ If the motorists were gratified by these concessions, some of their opponents were not. The Pedestrians' Association contrasted the "howls of derision and the stream of abuse" directed at the Minister of Transport by the motoring organisations when the Bill was first published with the "unanimous chorus of praise" which had greeted the emasculated version which had emerged from committee; the Minister had done everything possible to placate his

* It was still in force thirty-five years later, although the fee had been increased (in 1968) to 25s.⁶³

critics, short of destroying the Bill, and scarcely anything to strengthen it in the interests of other road-users.⁶⁵

By the time the Bill reached the House of Lords, there had been a ministerial reshuffle; Stanley went to the Cabinet as Minister of Labour and was replaced by Leslie Hore-Belisha.* The Labour spokesman in the Lords was critical; he doubted whether the post of Minister of Transport should continue to be "just a stepping-stone in Ministerial promotion". Should not the Minister of Transport not only have some real aptitude for the job, but also be allowed to stay in his post long enough to master the details and to develop a long view of possible reforms?⁶⁶

The House of Lords, which in the past had tended to show itself as rather more 'anti-motorist' than the Commons, justified its reputation this time. The amendment inserted in the Commons, to lift the speed limit between midnight and 5 a.m., was struck out. A new clause was accepted making it an offence to sell a noisy vehicle, despite the government's protests and half-promises, half-hopes that the "public-spirited leaders of the motor industry will co-operate with us in a determined effort to find a remedy". The Government accepted an Opposition amendment requiring licences to be endorsed for speeding or careless driving, unless the court for any special reason ordered that they should not be. Inevitably, despite Howe's attempts to have the speed limit struck out, and his plea that this issue was for the motorists the whole substance of the Bill, the Lords voted overwhelmingly to keep it.⁶⁷

The Lords' amendments came back to the Commons at the end of July. They came up for discussion at 11 p.m., and were somewhat casually introduced by Hore-Belisha as being mostly mere drafting changes. This led to instant protests by the motorists. After the Bill had spent months in committee, Moore-Brabazon complained, fourteen pages of amendments had now been produced at twenty-four hours' notice by a new Minister ignorant of what had happened in committee and "unacquainted with the motives and under-currents" there. This left the motorists at the mercy of the Lords - who on motoring matters notoriously had bees in their bonnets. His protest was supported by several other prominent motoring spokes-

* Leslie Hore-Belisha (1893-1957): MP (Lib. Nat.), 1923-42, 1942-45; Parliamentary Secretary, Board of Trade, 1931-2; Financial Secretary, Treasury, 1932-4; Minister of Transport, 1934-7; Secretary of State for War, 1937-40; Minister of National Insurance, 1945.

men and by the members of the Opposition, who wanted both to embarrass the government and to delay progress on the next item on the Order Paper, the Scottish Poor Law Bill. But, despite this peculiar alliance, the motion to consider the amendments was passed comfortably.⁶⁸

The main victory won, Hore-Belisha rattled through the amendments, frequently disclaiming any interest in principles which had previously been hotly defended by government spokesmen. Moore-Brabazon protested that even Stanley, who had shared the anti-motorist prejudices of the rest of the committee, had willingly agreed to lift the speed limit at night. Now a change of Minister seemed to have led to a complete change in the government's attitude. These complaints were brushed aside.⁶⁹ The debate was soon over. A week later the Bill received the Royal Assent.

* * * * *

The 30-mph speed limit came into effect on March 18, 1935. Its impact on casualty figures was not dramatic. They remained stable for a while, then began to rise again.* Both sides, as so often in this field, could claim that their point of view was vindicated. From June, driving tests were compulsory for anyone who had not held a licence before April 1934. The motoring organisations had refused to give any help and the Ministry of Transport created its own corps of official examiners.

The government was content to wait and observe the results of the Act. The speed limit was due to expire in 1939, and after two major Acts in four years there was in the meantime no effective pressure for further action. The road safety problem continued to be a real one. Motoring offences rose sharply from 319,000 in 1934 to 400,000 the following year (due mainly to the creation by the Act of a whole new class of speeding offences), and to 438,000 in 1938. The courts did little to discourage them. The average level of all fines fell slightly in 1935, and then remained steady at £1. 2s. od. Between 1934 and 1938 the number of disqualifications ordered rose by

* Fatal and personal injury accident figures had been higher in January/February 1935 than in the same months of 1934; for the remaining ten months of the year the figure was down. By 1936 the fatal and injury total was almost what it had been in 1934. In Oxfordshire, the death, injury and total accident figures in the two years following March 1935 were almost exactly what they had been in the two years before.⁷⁰

half, but to a total of only 12,000; the number of prison sentences rose similarly, but to only 800.

These facts were kept in front of the public eye by the Pedestrians' Association. The creation of the Association had at last provided a platform for all the opponents of the motor car, as both sides realised. The Association continued to criticise the frequent leniency of the courts; throughout the 1930s its *Newsletter* carefully documented the perversity of magistrates and juries, and recorded utterances such as that of a judge jailing a motorist found guilty of manslaughter: "It is no reflection on you morally to go to prison, and you are no less worthy to associate with your friends, in my opinion."⁷¹ The Association was quick to spot the subtle influences of the motorists wherever they might be found; it saw their hand in the activities of the National Safety First Association (which the Royal Commission of 1929 had found it "impossible to praise too highly", and which the Alness Committee of 1938 was to suggest should form the nucleus of a new 'Department of Propaganda'),⁷² especially when the MLC donated £1,000 to the NSFA as part of its own campaign against the speed limit.⁷³

The pedestrians' suspicions were reciprocated by the motorists. Shortly after the Pedestrians' Association had been set up, the *Autocar* suggested that it was a tool in the railways' campaign against road transport and was compelled to withdraw the comment.⁷⁴ When the PA secretary, in the course of a demonstration in support of a speed limit on the Kingston by-pass, described this as a road "of blood and tears", the SMMT circulated a counter-statement to the press condemning his comments as "hysterical" and "inaccurate".⁷⁵ The railways themselves were involved in a bizarre incident when one of the main-line companies refused to exhibit a Pedestrians' Association poster bearing the message: "100,000 killed and 3 million injured on the roads of Great Britain since the Great War". The General Manager explained to the Association that it was company policy "to avoid showing posters which can possibly be interpreted by one class of the community as being an attack upon another section".⁷⁶

In their criticisms of the courts, the pedestrians were not alone. Mr Justice Goddard, opening York Assizes in 1936, pointed out that the 1934 Act made endorsement or suspension of licences for speeding or careless driving mandatory, with exceptions only in special circumstances.⁷⁷ Despite guidance of this kind, the courts

continued to acquit drivers who could plead the most irrelevant mitigating circumstances – such as the driver accused of exceeding the speed limit and driving while not insured, for whom it was said that he had “done special radiological work for the King when he was indisposed lately”.⁷⁸ The Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis, in his annual report for 1935, noted that “the police efforts to enforce the speed limit had not been supported by some of the Courts as well as might have been expected”.⁷⁹ Hore-Belisha (who remained as Minister of Transport until the summer of 1937) in general tried to maintain the tough line begun by Stanley. In 1937, referring to one of the AA’s frequent campaigns against a proposed speed limit, he said: “Every restriction placed upon traffic in order to create a more orderly use of the roads has evoked agitation from bodies representative of vehicle-users. If the motorist is going to take up the attitude that he can do what he likes where he likes, there is going to be trouble.” (On this the AA commented in a letter to the press: “Whence comes the urge to restrict the normal uses of the motor car?”)⁸⁰ Belisha did his best to keep up pressure on the courts. He declared that the dangerous driver must be dealt with “not by Ministers of Transport, nor by highway authorities, nor by schoolmasters, nor by newspapers, but by those whose function it is to do justice”.⁸¹ He urged an annual conference of the Magistrates’ Association “to consider thoughtlessness on the roads as equal to conscious and deliberate wrong-doing”. This led an indignant MP to demand that the Prime Minister restore the practice whereby only the Home Secretary offered advice to magistrates. Baldwin replied that Hore-Belisha had acted quite properly: “It is his duty to preserve life. . . .”⁸²

One alternative to using the law was exhortation and propaganda, an approach supported both by motorists and their moderate critics. The Church Assembly, meeting in the spring of 1935, resolved in favour of more courtesy on the roads. (This resolution was naturally welcomed by the AA, who agreed that courtesy, not legislation, was indeed the answer.)⁸³ The Lancashire ‘courtesy cops’ experiment was set up in the spring of 1937, and a similar scheme was tried in Manchester. Large reductions in accidents were attributed to both. In general, the value of propaganda was something on which all parties could agree. A revealing though possibly extreme view was that of the House of Lords Select Committee, chaired by Lord Alness, which was set up in December 1937 to consider ways of

reducing road casualties. The Committee made many recommendations, criticised the Ministry of Transport's approach to the problem for "lack of vision, of initiative, and of driving force", and gave pride of place to proposals for more and better propaganda. The subject of this propaganda was to be not merely the need to avoid road accidents, but the importance of good relations among road-users. In a key passage – which perhaps goes some way to justifying the claim of the Pedestrians' Association that its report was "openly and unreservedly pro-motorist" – the Committee said:

Propaganda should be employed for the purpose of making those who do not own motor-cars realise how much they owe to motor transport for the supply of their food, for passenger services and so on. There still remains in the public mind a prejudice against motor-cars, born no doubt in the old days when few people owned them, and when they were considered as luxuries rather than part of an essential and national service, as they are today.⁸⁴

This was a rather one-sided view. But it was fair to draw attention to the lack of mutual understanding among road-users, which helped to prevent any agreement about the causes of road accidents, let alone solutions. Thus the Ministry of Transport told the Alness Committee that a mere 1·2 per cent of accidents were attributable to bad roads (for which they might have been held responsible); 90 per cent were caused by the faults of road-users. On the other hand the AA argued that of the accidents witnessed and analysed by their patrolmen, nearly 12 per cent were caused by bad roads, and only 56 per cent by human error, while another 14 per cent were due to Acts of God. The Pedestrians' Association declared simply that 'the great majority' were caused by motorists' excessive speed.⁸⁵

One possible way out of this *impasse* was to agree that everybody was right and that the fault lay not with any single factor or class of road-user, but with the situation which had allowed the motor vehicle to come into contact with soft-skinned humans in the first place. As early as 1935, Alker Tripp, the Assistant Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis, declared roundly that "motor traffic will never, and can never, mix safely with pedestrians and pedal cycles". It would take a long time to separate the different types of traffic; until this could be achieved, "a civilised degree of safety can only be achieved by definite restriction of freedom of movement".⁸⁶ Trenchard, a less subtle policeman, had more bluntly proposed

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more rigorous control of pedestrians to Piggott only two years before. But unless such restrictions could be shown to be part of some larger scheme, they were barely acceptable. Tripp himself was to elaborate his views in *Town Planning and Traffic*, published in 1942, but it was to be another twenty years before Buchanan helped make respectable the notion that conflict between man and motor might be irreconcilable; and even then little action followed. In the 1930s the notion was absurd. There had been no time to think of other approaches (the final report of the Alness Committee was published only in March 1939) before the war started.

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THE END OF THE ROAD FUND

By the beginning of the 1930s the major battles over taxation and roads finance had been fought. Even if the arguments about how to tax motorists and how to pay for the roads continued, the status of this debate was very different from what it had been in the 1920s. To put it simply, for politicians in or out of office, and for officials, the subject was no longer of critical importance. And as the loudest of the shouting died away, government and the motor industry at last began to establish some sort of working relationship.

In form, the arguments continued much as before.

The defeat of the Conservatives in May 1929 (how far brought about by disgruntled motorists it will never be possible to say) changed virtually nothing in the attitudes of government towards the motorist and roads finance. At the Treasury, Snowden inherited not only Churchill's officials but also his policies; at the Ministry of Transport, Morrison was far too concerned about the regulation of public transport to take any new initiatives in the financial field. There was no suggestion that a Labour government might have felt differently towards the wealthy motorist from a Tory government; the complaints of motorists, and government's replies to them, remained the same as they had always been. Nor was there any change after the fall of Labour in 1931.

Thus the fruitless arguments about the effects of, and possible substitutes for, the horsepower tax continued throughout the 1930s. In the autumn of 1929, Snowden called for a memorandum on the whole subject. The SMMT had again proposed a reduction in the unit rate to 15 shillings or preferably ten. Hurcomb pointed out to Grigg that the SMMT made no suggestions as to how the consequent loss of revenue could be made up. It would presumably need to be done by increasing the petrol tax. In that case the SMMT would not be able to get the support of the heavy vehicle manufacturers. Snowden noted briefly: "The case for the alteration of the present system does not seem to be established - I do not think we need to do anything in the next Budget."¹ A month later,

Moore-Brabazon wrote to *The Times* about what he called "a determined effort by the motor manufacturers to persuade the government to change the horsepower tax for an alternative". With brutal candour he suggested that this would have no effect. American cars sold because there was a demand for big-engined cars. The horsepower tax had in fact helped British industry; no English motor manufacturer "would seriously advance the argument that without the horsepower tax, even with the McKenna duties, we could have competed against American mass production imported into this country".* The British motor industry indeed would have never arisen at all without the tax it was now proposed to abolish.³ This was precisely the view of the Treasury. An internal memorandum prepared in the summer of 1929 noted that

our ancient formula for calculating the horsepower of cars . . . had undoubtedly desirable results in assisting the development of the highly efficient long-stroke engine and in knocking out the old Ford car in this country. Now that these results have been achieved it has been criticised in many quarters. . . .⁴

The industry was now prepared to admit that the tax might have had some advantages. Replying in *The Times* to Moore-Brabazon, Hacking of the SMMT wrote that the motor industry wanted to reduce the existing rate of tax. It was true, he admitted, that the problem was less simple than it seemed; the horsepower tax might indeed have helped in the development of the small motor car. And while an "unwise government" insisted on the present high rates of taxation, nothing would be gained from any change in the formula. If the government accepted the motor industry's present proposal, both the Exchequer and the industry would profit; but if they refused, the industry "would be unanimous in a policy of *laissez-faire*".⁵

Here at last was a definitive text justifying the attitude of the Ministry of Transport. Sending cuttings of this correspondence to Grigg at the Treasury Hurcomb commented:

You will see from Colonel Hacking's letter, which no doubt represents the real opinion of the manufacturers, that what they want

* The tax finally drove the large Ford right out of the British market. Against the advice of the British company, Ford head office in 1931 tried to launch the new Model A from the newly opened Dagenham factory. It was a commercial failure, and in the autumn of 1932 there appeared the first British 'baby' Ford, at 8 hp and £120.²

is a reduction in taxation and not a mere change in the formula. In other words the contention that the horsepower tax is, when all considerations are taken into account, more damaging to the industry than some alternative formula of tax, cannot, as we have always supposed, be sustained.

Piggott, asked for his views, minuted exultantly: "I quite agree. The SMMT have almost come out into the open at last."⁶

The limits of the argument had now been set, and they were not to be advanced before the war. Throughout the 1930s the motor manufacturers continued to demand a reduction in taxation, and to refuse to accept any change which was not also a reduction; the Treasury declined to consider any change which threatened to reduce the total tax revenue; and well-meaning third parties exclaimed both at the folly of a system which prevented the British motor industry from competing in overseas markets and at the failure of the industry to deal with this problem.

In its final report in 1931 the Royal Commission on Transport quoted allegations that the horsepower tax, although it did more even than the McKenna duties to protect the British domestic market, had greatly handicapped exports. They recommended that "a small expert committee be appointed by the Treasury and the Ministry of Transport to investigate . . . in consultation with the manufacturing interests".⁷ But both sides now knew their own and others' minds too well for the prospects for a joint committee to be very hopeful. In November 1932 Sir Percival Perry, the Chairman of Fords (UK), wrote to Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade, arguing that British firms might capture some trade from the United States if the taxation were reduced. (In 1930 he had proposed that the vehicle tax be replaced by purchase tax, supplemented by duties on bicycles and horse-drawn vehicles.) Hurcomb, asked for comments, simply sent the Board of Trade a copy of a memorandum on the same subject which had been sent the same day to the SMMT, and added:

It is not without significance that the Ford Motor company manufactures motor cars mainly of a comparatively high horsepower: and that low taxation of high-powered cars would give the foreigner exporting to this country an advantage that he does not possess. As the President will be aware, the export of cars from Britain is growing and by no means negligible.^{8*}

* This was barely true. The value of exports since the war had fluctuated wildly; at £3.9 million in 1932 they were a long way below the best, £7.4

The argument about the horsepower tax continued, unresolved, throughout the 1930s; the last exchanges on the relevant Ministry of Transport file start with a 1937 request from the Department of Overseas Trade for help in dealing with the allegation that the tax was crippling the export trade. To this the Ministry of Transport replied in familiar terms. They pointed out that the motor trade's complaint was less against the form of the tax than against its level, and, after quoting from the 1924 report of the Departmental Committee on Taxation, went on to repeat most of the arguments, and many of the exact phrases, which had been provided by Piggott in his minute for Hurcomb ten years before.

The Department of Overseas Trade gratefully acknowledged this advice.⁹ Only the coming of war was to bring about any change in this immobile situation.

The change of party made no difference either, to the continuing argument about who paid most for the roads.* The Ministry of Transport's reply to the SMMT † appeared only in the summer of 1930, in the form of evidence to the Royal Commission. They claimed that motor transport – which now made up almost the whole of the traffic on the roads – was responsible for almost all the annual highway costs of £60 million. They pointed out, as always, that one-third of the licence revenue was a luxury tax. ("Parliament presumably arrived at this decision on the ground that . . . generally speaking the ownership of a motor-car may be regarded as evidence of ability to pay.") But, Transport added, the SMMT had also taken no account of the capital value of the existing road system (which the RAC had estimated at anything up to £2,000 million). Motor transport had "had the good fortune to inherit this valuable network of roads" – a point which Piggott, in his evidence, supported by comparing the SMMT's arguments with those of a railway traveller offering to pay only the marginal costs directly attributable to his presence on the train. In any case, they concluded, tax rates on all except the smallest cars in Britain compared very well with those in most other countries.¹⁰

million in 1927. They were in fact to rise steadily again from 1932, but never accounted for more than 14 per cent of total production.

* Their main political significance was still that they provided a means of relieving unemployment. In 1929 the government authorised a £21-million extension of the trunk roads programme (with grant rates averaging over 75 per cent), and a £27½-million five-year programme for classified roads.

† See p. 220, above.

Members of the Royal Commission made little comment on these arguments at the time (although Crawford suggested that motorists were being asked to finance the capital costs of a far from perfect roads system and that to perpetuate the notion of 'luxury' taxation implicitly deprecated the spread of motoring to a wider section of the community).¹¹ In its report, the Royal Commission noted that while the motorist paid in taxation the equivalent of two-thirds of highway expenditure, only half of this was paid into the Road Fund. Consequently, two-thirds of the cost was found by the ratepayer. It was wrong that the Exchequer should keep the proceeds of the petrol tax; two-thirds of the cost of the highway system should be paid from tax revenue. Tax rates should be aimed at discouraging the use of heavier vehicles, and the whole subject should be investigated by a small expert committee.¹²

A further incentive to inaction, given the complicated book-keeping arrangements for roads finance, were the fears expressed by the local authorities. The all-party Roads and Bridges Committee of the Commons had earlier begged Snowden that if he should consider varying the taxation on motor vehicles, he should not choose the method of reducing the vehicle tax and increasing petrol duty; this might increase the Exchequer's total receipts, but would mean less income for the Road Fund.¹³

In the event, all these arguments and approaches were equally irrelevant. The growing crisis of 1931 left no room for concessions. In the April Budget the Treasury, after considering the possibility of a tax on bicycles (which they rejected as likely to produce criticism out of all proportion to the minute returns), raised the petrol duty by 2d. a gallon. Treasury files reveal no hesitation or anxiety about the reactions of motorists; Snowden wrote to the King's private secretary before introducing his Budget that this increase was outweighed by recent falls in the price of petrol, and added: "I have never liked the oil duty, but I can think of no other customs or excise duty, an increase of which would cause less hardship in present circumstances."¹⁴ The duty was increased by a further 2d. in the September Budget.

A much more serious blow to motorists was the report of the National Expenditure ('May') Committee in July 1931. The Committee not surprisingly, given the precedents and their own terms of reference, fastened on the idea of motoring as a luxury. They noted that although much roads expenditure was necessary for national

THE END OF THE ROAD FUND

economic development (a point Churchill had never been willing to concede), they could not ignore "the evidence on every side of heavy outlay on what we have termed 'amenity development' largely serving the needs of pleasure traffic insofar as it is required at all by present traffic". The majority report recommended sweeping cuts in the roads programme and the abolition of the Road Fund, commenting that the Fund had come to be regarded as "a convenient means of financing grandiose projects without the inconvenience of obtaining Parliamentary approval and providing for the cost in the annual Budget".¹⁵ The minority report doubted whether it was possible to single out any road as serving mainly pleasure traffic, or that, even if it were, to declare expenditure on it to be uneconomic. In any case motorists and highway authorities rightly regarded the Road Fund as allocated to roads purposes only.¹⁶

The Ministry of Transport reacted to this attack as they had reacted to similar attacks over the past ten years. A paper drafted for Morrison to submit to the Cabinet protested against the Committee's criticisms of the Road Fund as expressed in "the language of prejudice". To abolish the Fund would make motorists extremely reluctant to submit to special taxation, and it would need 'highly contentious' legislation to alter Lloyd George's 1909 Act.¹⁷*

Motorists, of course, would have agreed with these sentiments. Their point of view was concisely expressed by Moore-Brabazon in a Commons speech a few months later. The money that went to the Ministry of Transport, he said, was "motorists' money. It is not Imperial taxation. It is money that comes from the motorists, to be spent on one definite thing, namely the roads."¹⁸ But this was a motorist's and not a Parliamentary view. The following year both the Estimates Committee and the Public Accounts Committee recommended that expenditure from the Fund should be brought under Parliamentary scrutiny.¹⁹

By 1931 the government had changed again, but the economic situation, and the arguments about roads, were unaltered. The House of Commons, through its Select Committees, and the Treasury now saw eye to eye. It was a dangerous combination from the motorists' point of view, and it was to prove fatal to the Road Fund. For the Treasury, one by-product of the constitutional

* For the time being, the Fund survived. But Exchequer expenditure on roads fell steadily from £30 million in 1932 to £20 million in 1935.

requirement to treat motor taxation as though it were unique was the logical tangle which resulted from trying to defend any attempts to corner some of the revenue. It had been possible for Churchill in 1926 sweepingly to denounce the motor car as a luxury and to pocket an arbitrary share of motor-tax revenue in consequence. But his successors, making further inroads into the Road Fund, had to defend these against now continuous protests that motoring was a necessity, at a time when the spread of car ownership was making it increasingly difficult, in logic or in politics, to attack the car as an extravagance. (By 1932 there were 1.1 million cars on the roads, compared with less than half a million commercial vehicles of all kinds; the average cost of a new car was well under half what it had been ten years earlier, and running costs had fallen by nearly a third.) Treasury officials were anxious to move off the 'luxury' justification for motor taxation.

In 1932 the Salter Conference on competition between road and rail transport recommended that while each class of road-user should pay its fair share, the private motorist was a fair subject for sumptuary taxation and should pay *more than* his share – but that the excess should go to the Exchequer for the benefit of the taxpayer, and should not simply be ploughed back into the roads to subsidise other road-users.²⁰ Noting this recommendation, the Treasury commented: "Discussion is likely to turn on the amount of the private motorist's contribution to the national revenue rather than on the principle that he should contribute".²¹ At the same time, the Treasury did not want to abandon the 'luxury' argument until they had something to put in its place. When a few months later the Royal Commission on Transport, in its final report, noted that "private cars are not, as a class, articles of luxury", Gilbert minuted that the Treasury would need to be "very cautious in quoting with approval" this report.²² At the same time, the Treasury were trying to convince the Ministry of Transport that the whole of the petrol duty should go to the Exchequer, and that none of it should be spent on roads. The question, as Gilbert saw it, was whether petrol duty should be treated as national taxation for revenue purposes or as a levy for road costs.

On this point Sir Richard Hopkins * commented in a long minute

* Sir R. V. N. Hopkins (1880-1955): previously member and chairman, Board of Inland Revenue; Controller of Finance and Supply Services, Treasury, 1927-32; Second Secretary, 1932-42; Permanent Secretary, 1942-5. One of the

which summarised the wisdom of the opposition to the road fund, from the earliest debates in Parliament at the time of the 1909 Act to the present day. The argument of the Salter Report, Gilbert had argued, rested on the question whether road-users' contributions should meet road costs; the origins of the petrol duty were of interest because they related to the question whether goods vehicles should now pay only so much of the cost attributable to their use of the roads as was not already covered by what they paid in petrol duty. Hopkins pointed out that the principle that road-users should pay only what they cost the community led to the danger of a separate enclave inside the main Budget. The Treasury was often asked to set up such enclaves, and always refused. "The only sound thing is to follow the long accepted general principles. . . . We come back therefore to the proposition that the taxation of motor vehicles, like all other taxation, must be governed not by a formula but by judgement." The Permanent Secretary, Sir Warren Fisher, agreed without comment.* The Chancellor, Neville Chamberlain, noted: "It is evident that the maintenance of the petrol duty as a revenue duty and not as a contribution to road costs is very important to the Treasury, and we must insist on this."²⁴

The Treasury's views on motor taxation were rapidly hardening. In February 1933 Chamberlain wrote to the Minister of Transport, Pybus,[†] hoping that repayments to the Exchequer from the Road Fund would soon begin.²⁵ The following month the Conference of Motor Organisations sent a memorandum, arguing that "the users of mechanically-propelled vehicles are grossly overtaxed and . . . the situation demands a substantial all-round reduction in the interests of the country as a whole, no less than in those of the road and motor using community". The request by the Conference to bring a

most considerable and attractive figures of the civil service between the wars. "His leadership and his advice were the most pervasive feature in British financial policy from . . . 1927 until . . . 1945."²³

* Sir Warren Fisher was Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, and head of the civil service, for the whole period 1919-1939. It is striking that this seems to have been the first time he was personally involved in the rough-and-tumble of arguments about motor taxation.

† Sir Percy Pybus (1880-1935): MP (Lib. and Lib. Nat.), 1929-35. Minister of Transport, 1931-3. *The Times* obituary recorded that being "of a somewhat nervous disposition" he was "never particularly happy on the front bench"; and that it was no surprise when he asked to be relieved of his post at Transport so that he could return to the City.

deputation (and a similar request from the commercial users) was wearily greeted on the file with "The usual annuals on motor taxation have appeared" and a query whether the Chancellor really need see them. Warren Fisher wrote "I feel very loth to receive these tiresome deputations; but perhaps he may feel obliged to."²⁶

There was to be a single concession to motorists. In 1934, the Budget reduced the horsepower tax, as long demanded, from £1 to 15 shillings. Even this was acceptable to the Treasury only because of the 'brilliant condition' of the Road Fund; their estimates in February 1934 showed that even if £4 million a year were spent on road improvements, there would be a surplus in the Fund rising from at least £2 million in 1934/5 to perhaps £5-6 million in 1937/8. For the sake of the export trade, the tax could be reduced.²⁷

Chamberlain announced this move in his Budget statement in April. As Hurcomb had suggested in his brief, he was careful "not to join the throng who say the British car is not suitable for overseas", and went to some lengths to deny such an idea. But he had been told, he said, that to reduce the horsepower tax would stimulate production, and this would in turn react favourably upon the export trade.²⁸

This was the limit of the Treasury's generosity. When, in early 1935, the Minister of Transport (now Hore-Belisha) wrote to Chamberlain hoping that, as the Road Fund revenue to date was far higher than the estimate, he would agree to increase the roads programme, Hopkins noted in a minute to Warren Fisher:

I am much more interested in the very tempting amount of money which it is now found that the Road Fund will contain at the 31 March, and the large and growing balances of the immediately succeeding years. . . . There is a clear case for commencing the disintegration of the Road Fund by taking into the Exchequer a surplus at 31 March next estimated at £5 million. . . . A decision on these lines will not be popular with motorists, although the unpopularity would be diminished if they were allowed an increase in the road programme above the £4 million of the present year (which increase I imagine is more or less inevitable). Moreover, this course, which would be a repetition of one of the expedients used by Mr Churchill to balance the Budget, would be generally regarded as falling short of the best traditions of sound finance. But the crime, if it be one, would not be comparable in magnitude with Mr Churchill's.²⁹

Chamberlain's reply to Hore-Belisha was carefully non-

committal. When by April his intentions had become apparent, Hore-Belisha wrote to him to put on record his "sense of foreboding at the proposal to raid the Road Fund. . . . It will be taken very adversely by an important and powerful section of the community." He asked for assurances that at least the current roads programme would not be jeopardised.³⁰

Announcing the raid, Chamberlain did promise this much. He appropriated the whole of the Fund's £4½ million balance, arguing that its current income would suffice for current demands. All the familiar cries were uttered in the Commons debate, though perhaps with less conviction than in the past; there were many references to binding pledges, and to the principles of 1909, and to the gross and dishonest nature of their present repudiation. One member, reviewing the 'pledges', remarked:

If it is desired to tax motorists as motorists, for goodness' sake drop the theory that the money derived from that taxation is for Road Fund purposes. . . . To ask the motorists, year after year, to contribute to the specific purpose of developing the roads of the country and then to apply the money in other ways is altogether wrong.³¹

Chamberlain could have quoted these words in support when, the following year, he not only again appropriated the balance in the Fund but announced that from 1937 the Fund would finally lose its independence. It would submit annual estimates, like any department, and would receive its income from annual votes. "Surely when a Chancellor has to wrestle with a task so formidable as that in front of me, he ought to be able not only to survey the whole field of expenditure but also all his sources of revenue, so that he can direct them where they are most needed."³²

The cries of betrayal in the debate on this proposal were less convincing than ever. Chamberlain dealt briskly with a question about the propriety of taxing a particular section of the community for general purposes with an argument that virtually repeated the objections to earmarked taxation put forward in the 1909 debates by Hugh Cecil. Why should they not be so taxed? he asked. Was this not the position of every section of the community? "The people who use the roads are now a considerable proportion of the population, and if they were relieved they would find that they would

have to pay very much the same amount of taxation, only in a different form."³³

The Treasury showed much the same attitude when, three years later, it was announced that the vehicle tax would be increased from 15 to 25 shillings per hp at the beginning of 1940. The Chancellor, Simon, reminding the House that until 1935 the rate had been a pound, presented the increase as a logical alternative to an increase in income tax (which he ruled out as likely to depress industry): "The users of private cars, who very largely correspond to the Income Tax paying classes, have for five years enjoyed the benefit of this reduced scale of taxation. I therefore feel bound to ask them, in these stern times, to submit to a substantially increased scale".³⁴ This led to a formal protest from the Labour opposition, who objected to the simultaneous increase in the motor-cycle duty. They argued that the government's proposal was a vindictive attack on the working class, and that these tax increases were "steadily reducing the possibilities of our lower paid workers from indulging in motoring". There followed an unresolved argument about whether or not the working class either did, or could, expect to own motor cars and motor cycles. The middle-class viewpoint was represented by an appeal for 'progressive' motor taxation, increasing with the size of car, and by appeals for exemptions from the increase for commercial travellers, district nurses and midwives. Simon rejected all these, and with some satisfaction pointed out that the horsepower tax was already progressive in exactly the sense suggested.³⁵

The SMMT predictably opposed the increase. The *Evening Standard* tried to interest the AA in a campaign against it.³⁶ But the government insisted, and the proposal was passed.

The SMMT's criticism of the tax proposals might have suggested that the traditional arm's-length relationship between the government and the industry was the same as ever. In fact the gradual passage of time, and, more especially, the threat of war were bringing the two sides closer than they had ever been. By the mid-1930s both sides had settled down to trying to mitigate the effects of the seemingly endless depression. Though unable to make a move on the horsepower rating, the government did what it could to help the industry promote sales at home and abroad. The Colonial Office set up a committee to scrutinise colonial road traffic and other regulations which might affect British exports, and the SMMT noted that

there was now much more consultation before such regulations were drafted. One of the results of the formal decision at the Ottawa Conference to set up a system, however imperfect, of customs duties (instead of the haphazard arrangements which had existed hitherto), was closer contacts between government departments and the industries affected. The SMMT appealed for help against the 'dumping' of low-priced German cars in 1937-8, and was given leave to apply to the Import Duties Advisory Committee; the imports ceased towards the end of 1938. As always, the industry had continual dealings with the Ministry of Transport, trying as far as possible to reach voluntary agreements (about, for instance, constructional details) and thus to avoid the need for legislation. All these relationships were acknowledged with courtesies in the SMMT's annual reports, and Hurcomb's move from Transport in 1937 was formally declared to have "terminated a long and useful contact with the motor industry".³⁷*

Road-users never wholly overcame their suspicions of government intentions towards the railways. On the anti-railway front, their organisation became increasingly elaborate as the years passed. The British Road Federation had been founded in 1932, backed by the AA and SMMT among others, as "the one representative body which is making efforts to combat the sinister and distorted propaganda of the railways in their efforts to enslave British industry". It remained in being throughout the decade and was revived, with a change of emphasis, after the war. The Long Distance Road Haulage Committee, formed originally to put the views of the big hauliers to the Royal Commission in 1929, developed into the permanent Road Haulage Association, which again took on a new lease of life after 1945.

But some of the old crude militancy died away. The industry at last gained the political confidence to move away from Stenson Cooke's AA and the MLC. The SMMT rejected suggestions from some of its members in the mid-1930s that it should set up its own 'political department' to oppose restrictive legislation.³⁹ For the

* The industry also made its own arrangements for keeping afloat in these difficult times. In the motor trade, resale prices were rigorously maintained, especially in the later 1930s - occasionally by questionable devices: "If it was reported that a certain agent was habitually cutting prices, we would send a trusted man of plausible mien to unfold a roll of notes and offer cash on the nail for a 'cut' price. Then, if the agent succumbed, drastic action was taken. . . ."³⁸

first time, it made efforts to think seriously about roads and road transport in general rather than following the MLC line. In 1935 and 1936 it submitted its own memorandum on roads policy to the Minister of Transport; and when in 1938 Rees Jeffreys complained about the MLC's failure to counter current railway lobbying, the SMMT's secretary felt able to declare loftily that "the MLC is never interested at all in transport".⁴⁰

In the last years of the 1930s, industry and government were brought closer together than ever before by the prospect of war, above all in the 'shadow' scheme for creating extra capacity for wartime engineering production. In 1935 Sir Hugh Dowding, head of the Supply and Research Department at the Air Ministry, asked Roy Fedden, the Chief Engineer with the Bristol aircraft company, to help the government set up a Midland group of factories to produce his series of Bristol aircraft engines.* Bristol and five other firms took part in the scheme, and six factories were in production by the outbreak of the war.⁴¹

At the time the existence of the shadow scheme had no effect on government attitudes towards other aspects of the motor car, but it marked the end of *laissez-faire* on the industrial side. Government and the motor industry were never again to be independent of each other.

* The engine had originated with the design team of the motor firm of Straker Squire, where Fedden had been chief engineer before joining Bristol in 1920.

PART THREE

The War and After

In the early days of the war, the British had a number of advantages over the Germans. They had a large fleet, which was the first and most important of these. They also had a large army, which was the second and most important of these. They also had a large air force, which was the third and most important of these. They also had a large navy, which was the fourth and most important of these. They also had a large army, which was the fifth and most important of these. They also had a large air force, which was the sixth and most important of these. They also had a large navy, which was the seventh and most important of these. They also had a large army, which was the eighth and most important of these. They also had a large air force, which was the ninth and most important of these. They also had a large navy, which was the tenth and most important of these.

The war, by contrast, opened up a new world of possibilities. It was the beginning of a new era. The British had a large fleet, which was the first and most important of these. They also had a large army, which was the second and most important of these. They also had a large air force, which was the third and most important of these. They also had a large navy, which was the fourth and most important of these. They also had a large army, which was the fifth and most important of these. They also had a large air force, which was the sixth and most important of these. They also had a large navy, which was the seventh and most important of these. They also had a large army, which was the eighth and most important of these. They also had a large air force, which was the ninth and most important of these. They also had a large navy, which was the tenth and most important of these.

I5

AUSTERITY MOTORING

The war and after

In the first war, restrictions on motoring had consisted of an increase in the fuel tax from 3d. to 6d., which came into force ten months after the beginning of the war, the imposition at the same time of a duty on imported cars, and some fairly liberal rationing (later supplemented by some unenforceable restrictions on the use of private cars). Public opinion was an ineffective check on the use of cars; protests about pleasure motoring continued throughout the war. The Treasury's proposals to increase vehicle taxation in 1916 were defeated. It was not until 1918 that the Select Committee on Luxury Duty had proposed additional duties on cars, and by then the time for action was past.

In 1939, by contrast, a petrol rationing scheme had been announced as early as the beginning of August.¹ Further details were given on the day war was declared, and the scheme came into force three weeks later. It provided for a universal 'basic' ration, which varied with the horsepower of the car, and aimed to allow for between one and two hundred miles a month. Supplementary rations were available for business and other uses. The first Order laid under the Import, Export and Customs Powers (Defence) Act, again on the day war was declared, prohibited the import of cars without a licence from the Board of Trade (along with textiles, clothes, glassware, clocks and watches, vacuum cleaners and toys).² These restrictions did not stop pleasure motoring altogether. In the peaceful months of the 'phony war' it was not universally accepted that this was necessary. In May 1940 the RAC asked for an extra petrol ration during the Easter holiday, and at about the same time issued a leaflet entitled *Why lay up your car?*, which suggested that it might not be entirely wise "to dispense with the use of such a faithful and valued friend as your car" and that keeping it on the road would also help to keep the retail side of the industry solvent.³ Before the spring Budget the Motor Legislation Committee suggested to the

Chancellor that the only way to prevent the ruin of the retail trade was to bring down motor taxation.⁴ Cars continued to be widely used for purposes quite unconnected with the war effort. Regular questions were asked about this in Parliament.

The government took a somewhat *laissez-faire* attitude. In the summer of 1940, the Secretary for Petroleum, Mr Geoffrey Lloyd, was asked what he proposed to do about the fact that several hundred cars had been observed at Catford Greyhound Stadium the previous Saturday. The question (apart from the dogs) might have been asked in the previous war; Lloyd's reply, too, was on once-familiar lines: "... The number of race meetings at Catford has been reduced from three a week to two. As the number of cars present was approximately the same as previously, a very substantial reduction in the use of petrol has already been achieved. . . ."⁵ Criticisms were also heard of the number of cars to be seen at seaside and other resorts, in shopping centres and carrying people to work.⁶ A year later, identical complaints were still being made. Lloyd declined to intervene, remarking on one occasion that he deprecated "the heresy-hunting of motorists on every occasion".⁷

For over two years there was no absolute ban on pleasure motoring. Purchase tax (at a rate of 33½ per cent) was imposed on cars, along with other goods, in October 1940, and in the same month the Ministry of Transport announced that the building of cars for civilian use had now stopped; only 400 new cars, of which half were imported, were still available.⁸ But although the abolition of the basic petrol ration was carefully considered by the government the following year, it was rejected – for what the official history described as 'social and political' reasons.⁹ The decision to abolish it was taken only in the spring of 1942. In mid-March Lloyd announced that the value of the basic coupons would be halved for May and June, and that the ration would cease thereafter. "These measures", he said at last, two and a half years after the start of the war, "are designed to end pleasure motoring for the present, and I should emphasise that the government want all unessential cars taken off the road."¹⁰ There were exemptions – country dwellers were allowed enough petrol for two weekly trips to shop, one to attend church – but for most motorists the only course was to lay up their cars. Over two million had been in use in August 1939; by 1941 this had fallen to only a million and a half, by 1943 to a mere 700,000. Judging by the road casualty figures, this reduction was just as well.

The black-out made the use of roads at night a perilous affair. In the last five months of 1939, over a thousand more people were killed on British roads than in the first seven (the increase being almost entirely among pedestrians). In the first three months of the war, more Britons were killed by motor vehicles than by enemy action, at home or abroad. Although a night-time speed limit of 20 mph was introduced in February 1940, the 1940 figures for road deaths were worse than those for 1939, and the 1941 figures worse still. Only in 1942 did things improve.¹¹

For the time being, motoring ceased to be a subject of political concern, and contacts between motorists and government were greatly reduced. There were occasional exceptions. The motoring organisations, like other employers, had to make out a reasoned case for deferring the call-up of their essential staff. They were disturbed when in 1942 the old proposal of amalgamation was revived by a Labour back-bencher asking Bevin, as Minister of Labour, whether he would take steps to combine the AA and the RAC, so as to reduce duplication and save labour. In his answer, Bevin did not entirely dismiss the proposal, adding somewhat gratuitously that "we might have had a nice world if it had not been for the opposition of the vested interests".¹² Both organisations were, as always, opposed to the idea. A meeting was hastily arranged at the Ministry of War Transport with representatives of the RAC and AA, and officials from the Ministry of Labour. In general, the outcome was satisfactory; the AA noted that "after the meeting, Birtchnell [of Transport] seemed favourable, remarking: 'I can settle Ministry of Labour once and for all.'"¹³ No more was heard of the suggestion.

Meanwhile the government's relations with the manufacturers developed and changed in a way whose effects were to be permanent. In this mechanised war the importance of the motor industry, with other sections of the engineering industry, was recognised from the beginning (or, given the 'shadow' factory scheme, from well before the beginning). Members of the industry were brought into the Ministry of Supply, in particular, to help with production planning; for the first time Whitehall had some real knowledge of the industry, its techniques and its problems. The unquestioned belief that relations with the motor industry could adequately be left mainly to the department responsible for roads was replaced by the war-time notion of the 'sponsor' department with special knowledge of and

concern for the industries under its care. One former senior official has suggested that the post-war motor industry was effectively created by government during the war; the technical advances brought about by importing advanced machinery and disseminating techniques finally broke up the old cottage industry pattern based on the bicycle workshops of forty years before.¹⁴

Symbolic of these changes was the dissolution of the old Motor Legislation Committee. Created largely on the initiative of the AA to fight the creation of the Ministry of Transport and always dominated by the AA, it was no longer an appropriate spokesman for an industry which had become a partner with government. From now on, the industry's point of view was to be put exclusively by the SMMT, which set up its own 'Parliamentary and Legal Council', as well as a public relations committee to put across the story of the industry's wartime efforts. The motoring organisations formed their own 'Standing Joint Committee' (which was welcomed by the *Autocar* in an editorial headed "Motoring's need is unity").¹⁵

Partnership with government did not inhibit the industry from promoting its own interests. At the very beginning of the war it asked for a larger allocation of steel for cars for the home market, arguing – in terms familiar enough in peacetime, but somewhat incongruous in the circumstances – that a high level of home sales was essential for the lower unit-costs needed for successful exporting and for a properly balanced production programme.¹⁶ This argument was relevant only if it was agreed that exports should be kept up. The government originally agreed to support a preliminary export programme; in 1940 exports of motor vehicles were worth £6½ million. This achievement was applauded by the Board of Trade, but criticised by Greenwood, the Minister without Portfolio, as a waste of resources, and official support was withdrawn; exports of motor vehicles fell to well under £½ million in 1942, and exports of motor cars to 23 in 1944.¹⁷

Although the government would not allow the industry to continue business as usual, thinking about the return to business as usual began soon after. The Board of Trade first approached the industry, to start discussing post-war reconstruction, in 1941. From then on formal contacts on this subject were almost continuous; the SMMT suggested a little later that there had been created

virtually a new relationship between industry and government . . . whereby the Board of Trade can be apprised of the industry's problems, survey the situation from a central viewpoint, and support the industry wherever possible in the attainment of its objectives. The motor industry welcomes this form of collaboration . . .¹⁸

This somewhat overstated the likelihood of purposeful action by either side. The responsibility for thinking about peacetime conditions was with the Board of Trade, an essentially non-innovating department and one which had been relatively lightly touched by the wartime inflow of new men and new ideas; in any case, freedom of action was still largely restricted by the same factors as before 1939. The central problem was taxation. Without the prospect of changes in the levels and the nature of motor taxation, the industry saw no reason to change their production policy. For the most part, they simply assumed that at the end of the war production lines would start up again exactly where they had stopped in 1939/40. The *Economist* commented that if the industry were to get into export markets after the war, it would need to develop wholly new and larger models; it added that the industry's reconstruction plans rested on decisions still to be made by the government.¹⁹ But the government, still influenced by the inter-war years, would make no decisions about taxation in particular, until the industry gave them a lead.

Basically, the industry's attitude was a restrictive one. Its main concern was to protect the small but secure home market against competition from outside and from within. To abolish the horsepower tax would strengthen the position of American cars. Again, to keep the existing system would make it easier to continue to sell not merely the same types but the same models as before the war. Although the SMMT managed to persuade the government in 1943 to allow manufacturers to go ahead with designs and prototypes for post-war models, they announced the same summer that there would in fact be no new models for some time.²⁰

Probably the most extreme conservative was Morris, who had led the hysterical campaign between wars against abolishing the McKenna duties. In 1945 he declared that world markets still demanded the small or medium-sized car in which the British industry (and Morris) excelled.²¹ Sir Miles Thomas has recalled Morris, as late as 1946, declining to go ahead with production of what was to

become the unprecedentedly successful 'Minor' on the grounds that Morris were fully tooled up to produce the existing Morris Eight, for which demand was in any case insatiable.²² The 'Eight' was all too typical of the obsolescent designs which in these crucial years so damaged the reputation of the post-war British motor industry in export markets.

Although work slowly got under way (by October 1944, 56 firms had been given permission to start experimental and preparatory work),²³ there was very little attempt to rethink the principles of car design. There was some suspicion of the few who did try. Towards the end of the war Sir Roy Fedden, who had been acting as Special Technical Adviser to Sir Stafford Cripps at the Ministry of Aircraft Production, started work on designing a medium-sized car. It had many new features, including a three-cylinder, air-cooled radial engine, situated at the rear, and represented (in Fedden's words) "a serious attempt to make a vehicle which has a ready sale at home and yet will, with a new formula, have a large export sale and be truly . . . a competitive counterpart of the modern American car".²⁴ Established firms resented this attempt to break into their markets; there was much criticism of the fact that Fedden was allowed to acquire materials and to build up a small design team. Some well-placed support inside the government helped to keep his project afloat, as the diary of Hugh Dalton (then President of the Board of Trade) showed:

14.4.44 . . . To see Ernest Bevin at his request. He wants to do a wangle with me to help work on post-war models. He is particularly keen that Roy Fedden should be allowed to go on making his post-war car. He met Miles Thomas of Nuffields the other day and told him that the other manufacturers were a lot of bloody fools and that, if they went on threatening Parliamentary questions about Fedden and a few others who were getting any facilities, it would mean that he would denounce them. I said that . . . we should also like to wangle something.*²⁵

The industry continued to be hampered not only by its conser-

* Despite this official goodwill, the project got little further. Fedden has since suggested that it was a mistake to try to develop such a revolutionary vehicle with his own limited resources. Certainly orthodox engineering opinion was not yet ready for a rear-engined, air-cooled car, as the rejection by the British industry (and others) of the Volkswagen later showed.

vatism but by disagreements among the various road-users. Early in 1943 the secretary of the SMMT told Rees Jeffreys that the idea of a flat-rate tax on cars of all sizes was effectively a non-starter, since it seemed unlikely to bring in enough revenue unless supplemented by some other form of taxation, probably a fuel tax – which would be opposed by the commercial operators.²⁶ The proposal which the SMMT repeatedly put to the Board of Trade in 1943–44 was therefore a compromise. Arguing that design had been hampered by the horsepower tax, they suggested that this should now be replaced not with a flat-rate tax but with one based on cylinder capacity (i.e. still related to engine size). The tax should advance in small steps – probably 100 cc at a time. The SMMT went on to argue that taxation, on whatever basis, should be reduced so as to encourage the demand for cars. These two changes would stimulate the manufacture of types of cars suitable for export markets (or, as the SMMT put it in a public statement in April 1944, would “unleash the whole flood of export business”).²⁷

They did not explain the reasoning behind their first proposal. Its aim was in fact to give British manufacturers greater freedom to choose the shape of engine (by basing the tax on cubic capacity rather than on cylinder diameter) and its size (by making the steps small ones), while at the same time continuing to protect them against American competition (by putting a premium on small engines). They backed up these proposals with a range of other demands. The report on ‘Post-war reconstruction’ finally submitted by the SMMT to the Board of Trade in March 1944 asked for adequate protection against competitive imports, for the elimination of unnecessary traffic regulations, for regulation of raw material prices (if necessary), for the establishment of a national transport and national road construction programme, and for support for the industry’s export activities, “both by using the country’s purchasing power to the full as a bargaining factor in obtaining the necessary facilities from British and foreign countries, and by encouraging the maximum use of motor vehicles in the domestic market”.²⁸

But these resounding general demands were of little use without some agreement on details. On taxation, the manufacturers could persuade neither the motorists nor the retailers to accept even the compromise they had suggested. The Standing Joint Committee agreed that taxes ought to be reduced, but insisted – as the AA had been insisting for twenty years – that they should fall mainly on

fuel. They put this proposal to the Treasury in April 1944, and went on to argue:

The success of post-war plans for the distribution of population and industry, the creation of new towns and villages, better housing conditions, the revival of agriculture and the absorption of labour in new industries, is closely bound up with road transport, of which the private car and motor-cycle form an integral part. . . .²⁹

Private transport, the SJC claimed (for by no means the first, nor the last time) was no longer a luxury, and should not be taxed as if it were. The retailers agreed. In February 1944 the Motor Agents' Association had asked for a fuel tax. Later in the year they changed their mind and proposed a kind of recurrent sales tax, to be levied each time a car changed hands and based on its selling price. This suggestion was hotly attacked by the SMMT. The *Motor* commented on "the hopelessly disunited position of the motoring world" and continued to campaign for a unified motorists' organisation, led by the RAC (whose position, the writer suggested, had been weakened over the past twenty years by the larger but politically less influential AA). The *Motor's* own proposal for taxation was to abolish it altogether, and this too was urged on the government by the industry's spokesmen.^{30*}

The government had no intention of abolishing motor taxation, but they were anxious to do something about its details. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Anderson, had announced in January 1944 that the Treasury was considering the whole subject. Three months later his officials were still discussing it with Dalton's.³² But officials still had little to go on. In his Budget speech in April, Anderson said that he would welcome views about possible new systems of taxation, and referred to "an embarrassing conflict . . . of opinion" in the industry.³³ The epithet is striking. The implication that the government would find it hard to make a move without the unanimous support of the interests concerned is a surprising echo, in the middle of planning for reconstruction, of all the neutralist attitudes of the previous twenty years. It disgusted Geoffrey Crowther's *Economist*, which in May demanded that the Chancellor should take the initiative and disregard the industry's fears of foreign

* Cf. Dalton's diary for May 18, 1944: "Tom Williams, MP, with two talkative and rather unimpressive men who want all taxes on motor cars abolished. I don't know why T. W. mixes himself up in this."³¹

competition.³⁴ But, just as before the war, neither side would move first and each blamed the other; in the autumn of 1944 the motor industry was reported as seriously concerned at the government's failure, resting partly on the lack of a decision about the tax system, to approve their plans for resuming production at the end of the European war.³⁵

In December 1944 the government tried to break the deadlock by announcing half a decision. Anderson told the Commons that there would be "appreciable advantage" in changing the basis of the tax from horsepower to cubic centimetres. The public would not gain from this change (which would come into force in January 1946), since the new system would have to produce as much revenue as the old. No decision had yet been taken on the size of the steps in taxation; this awaited agreement by the manufacturers.³⁶

This was the first change in the basis of the vehicle tax since 1910. The manufacturers welcomed it. Sir Miles Thomas, speaking for the SMMT, declared that it "frees British car designers from restrictions which have hampered technical progress in car engines for years".³⁷ But in general it was not acclaimed. The *Economist*, in the tone in which it had once spoken of the antics of private motorists, commented: "So protection is preferred to exports. . . . It has become the standard practice of the present neo-feudal age to act in consultation with the special interests concerned, who in this case are the SMMT."³⁸ As an explanation, the first part of this comment had some truth. There was, too, something in the suggestion that 'consultation' was a built-in part of the policy-making process. But it was wide of the mark to blame consultation for bad decisions. The process had not changed; it was simply that, after twenty-five years, government and industry had at last managed to reach agreement.

Most critics of the tax suggested that the agreement would make little difference. The leader writer of *The Times* welcomed a taxation policy which might discourage "the high-powered car of typical American size", but doubted whether the tax by itself would do much to boost exports.³⁹ The Managing Director of Jowetts wrote that since the best export model was likely to fall in the 1½-2-litre range, this type should be encouraged by low taxation on engines up to two litres, and much higher rates above that size.⁴⁰ The Motor Agents Association agreed: "Changing . . . from one purely mechanical formula to another will do nothing in the way of remedy.

While any mechanical factor is retained in a taxation formula, the British motor engineer will be forced to remain a 'tax engineer'."41

The RAC and the AA immediately both criticised the rate of tax as too high; the RAC added that the number of steps would lead to an excessive number of different models. After a short pause for reflection, the organisations' Standing Joint Committee issued a statement flatly condemning the proposals as "disappointing and inadequate": they would hamper the expansion of the industry; they would aggravate the artificial stimulation of cars with small engines unsuited to the export market; and so on.⁴²

A more reasoned critique was offered by Laurence Pomeroy, the Technical Editor of the *Motor*. In a sophisticated version of Morris's arguments he suggested that demand for small cars was a function of many factors other than the tax system – for instance, availability of garage space. Since the British industry would never be able to compete with the Americans in really large cars, should it not go for the world market in small ones?⁴³

The only aspect of the tax on which most of the motor interests were agreed was that it was too high. In 1945 the SMMT put out a statement, signed by the motoring organisations, the retailers, the British Road Federation and the bus operators. They argued, as had the SMMT before the war, that not only the method but also the weight of taxation kept down engine size. It would also restrict the use of cars, thus preventing the full utilisation of the capital tied up in the roads system. And of course, cars were no longer a luxury: "It is no luxury that they can also be used for healthy access to fresh air in holiday times. They help the continued life of the smaller cities and are indispensable to the aged, the weak and the war wounded." The motorists went on to argue that since the tax was so high, it was bound, sooner or later, to be reduced; it followed that in failing to reduce it immediately the government were deliberately creating a mood of uncertainty which could only hamper the industry.⁴⁴ The SMMT argued that this uncertainty was infringing the right of every man and woman to drive their own car.⁴⁵ Dalton recorded, with his habitual distaste, a discussion at the Board of Trade with some leaders of the industry in April 1945:

Receive Sir P. Bennett, Sir William Rootes, Sir Patrick Hennessy and Nixon, representatives of the motor industry,* who are full of complaints. Rather a desultory and unsatisfactory discussion . . .

* Representing Joseph Lucas, Rootes, Ford and the SMMT respectively.

[Hennessy] clamours for taxation to be reduced. He says that, until it is reduced, they can't tell what cars to make and can't begin designing, and designing a new car takes two years. . . . They are not at all a united body and were obviously all at sixes and sevens this morning.⁴⁶

Much of the disunity lay not among the private car interests, but, as before the war, between them and the users of commercial vehicles. The SMMT floated the SJC's proposal for switching to a system of registration duty plus a fuel tax. But most manufacturers would agree to this only if it were acceptable to the commercial users. As ever, it was not, and the SMMT thus had to fall back on their original proposal.

By October 1945 Dalton was himself at the Treasury. When, in his Budget that month, he came to deal with motor taxation (a topic on which, he noted, every member of the Cabinet seemed to think himself an expert)⁴⁷ he announced that the new system would come into effect in January 1947. But he could still say nothing about the size of the steps in the tax. He and the Board of Trade (now headed by Stafford Cripps) continued to wait impatiently for guidance. Speaking to the SMMT's annual dinner in November, Cripps chided them for their disunity:

Let me say frankly that you are not as helpful as you might be. It would help the government more if you could all speak with one voice. The horsepower tax rating has been altered in the direction which we believe the majority of the industry desired but we still do not know whether you think the steps should be small or large. The matter has been left adjustable during the discussion of the Tax Bill if – but only if – a strong and decided preference is shown by the industry to assist in its export policy – if, that is to say, it has one!⁴⁸

It was precisely the problem that the industry did not have a preference. In the absence of better suggestions, the new system came into operation in January 1947, graduated in steps of 100 cc. But by that time an export policy of a kind had been forced on the industry by the government. It was in the end the government's insistence on this, as a vital element in their economic policy, which gave the industry the bargaining power to exact a fully revised taxation system.

For a few years after the war the government were able to force an export policy on the industry because of their continuing controls

over raw materials – in particular, steel. To allow some production for the home market on condition that the rest was exported was in fact a logical relaxation of wartime controls over both materials and production. But the industry at once objected that at best only a small proportion of output could be exported, and that this would be uncompetitive unless they were allowed enough steel for reasonably high home sales (and thus reasonably low unit costs).

With the impatient Dalton at the Board of Trade, negotiations to push the industry off this point of view made little progress. During the three months' office in 1945 of the Tory 'caretaker' government, the Board of Trade announced that the industry had proposed to produce 200,000 vehicles in the next year; and that they had been asked if they could export half of these.⁴⁹ The industry had not replied by the time Labour came to office in July. At the Board of Trade, the persuasive Cripps took up the discussions again. At first he made little progress. By the autumn it had been informally agreed only that the industry's export target should be 30 per cent.⁵⁰ At the SMMT dinner in November Cripps publicly suggested that the target should be at least 50 per cent; the country should be content to go without cars in the interests of the export effort. These remarks were greeted with boos and shouts of "No!" and "Tripe!" Cripps added, rather bitterly: "I have often wondered whether you thought Great Britain was here to support the motor industry, or the motor industry was here to support Great Britain. I gather from your cries you think it is the latter."⁵¹

But the following month, after further talks, he was able to announce that half the 200,000 cars to be produced in 1946 would be exported. Soon after, the target was increased, again by agreement, to 60 per cent.⁵²

The industry's export programme was now a significant element in the government's economic policy. The *impasse* over taxation could not be allowed to continue. Here again, the impetus for change came from Cripps at the Board of Trade. The Ministry of Supply were still the industry's 'sponsor' department, and controlled its allocations of raw materials. In April 1946 the importance of the industry's relationship with government was formalised by the setting up, under the Ministry of Supply, of the National Advisory Council for the Motor Manufacturing Industry; this contained representatives of motor employers and unions, and was chaired by the Permanent Secretary of Supply. Whatever the symbolic im-

portance of NACMMI, in practice the industry's informal contacts with government, and especially with Cripps, were probably of more importance. Officials at Supply appear to have worked directly to Cripps, often virtually bypassing their own Minister, the ineffectual Wilmot.⁵³

In early 1946 the industry was asked what levels of exports would be possible, compared with before the war, and how exports could be stimulated. Its reply was formally published in a NACMMI report the following spring. The joint industry-government council advised that a good export performance depended on buoyant home sales, and that these would be impossible with present tax levels; they recommended a single flat-rate tax, to encourage the building of larger engines. As for the future demand for cars, NACMMI suggested that any increase over the 1938 figure of nearly two million registrations would have to be found among householders with gross annual incomes of under £500. This class appeared to be influenced more by the level of standing charges (vehicle tax and insurance premium) than by running costs (mainly petrol). If taxation were unrelated to engine size, demand might shift towards the larger car. They added – in an egalitarian tone appropriate to a welfare state: “Observation suggests that it is the small car that normally carries the most passengers, the lower income groups who really need the larger car.”⁵⁴

The new tax system based on cubic capacity had, of course, just come into effect. It is a measure of how important the government thought motor-car exports that when Dalton introduced his next Budget four months later, he said that he was prepared to consider this latest proposal despite all the difficulties.⁵⁵ He did so. During the committee stage of the Finance Bill he announced that from January 1948 there would be a flat-rate tax of £10 per vehicle for all cars first registered after January 1947, whatever the size of their engines. (Some revenue would be lost on the larger cars now paying more than £10; to offset this, purchase tax on cars costing more than £1,000 would be raised to 66 $\frac{2}{3}$ per cent.)⁵⁶

The government now turned to trying to ensure that the industry fulfilled its side of the bargain. As in 1929, there was no sign that this Labour government regarded the private car with different eyes from those of the Conservatives; the supply of cars to the home market in the 1940s was regulated not by ideology but by the demands of the balance of payments. But, although the government

had shown no interest in back-bench suggestions that they should rationalise (or even nationalise) the motor industry, they were – reasonably enough – anxious to increase the rationality of its collective behaviour. Above all, they wanted to put an end to the fragmented competition among dozens of marginally different models which had been typical of the 1930s. The key to success here was to identify the ‘best’ design and to concentrate on it – and, of course, to choose a design which would sell abroad as well as at home. Cripps had put this to the industry at the SMMT dinner in November 1945:

We must provide a cheap, tough, good-looking car of decent size – not the sort of car we have hitherto produced for the smooth roads and short journeys of this country – and we must produce them in sufficient quantities to get the benefits of mass-production. . . . We cannot succeed in getting the volume of export we must have if we disperse our efforts over numberless types and makes.⁵⁷

No politician had attempted so firmly to influence the industry’s commercial policy since Walter Long had advised them in 1903 that they were wasting their time on fast high-powered cars. The issue of concentrating on an ‘export’ model had underlain all the discussions of possible changes in the tax system. It was at last put formally to the industry when, in April 1946, NACMMI were asked to comment on the possibility of drastically reducing the range of current models. The industry’s reply, presented in January 1947, was that the range ought not to be ‘excessively’ limited.⁵⁸ * The *Economist* commented (not entirely fairly), that now that the industry had the flat-rate tax so long demanded the way was open to develop a more standardised range of bigger cars, suitable for home and export markets. If the industry insisted on testing home demand before introducing new models, it would lose export sales. The answer was for the government now to insist on rapid standardisation. “But unfortunately the history of motor taxation does not give much ground for belief that the government will ever press the national interest on the industry.”⁶⁰

* The industry’s arguments have never been notable for their consistency. One may compare their objections to reducing their range with their protest, at exactly the same date, that the government’s taxation policy prevented them from concentrating on a single model over a long period, as Ford had done with the Model T; or this argument, in turn, with NACMMI’s objection to building a ‘people’s car’ on the Volkswagen pattern. (“Successful motor car designs are subject to continuous evolutionary development.”)⁵⁹

The government continued to do its best. In September 1947 the Ministry of Supply urged that each firm or even factory should concentrate on a single model. The SMMT replied that the industry was confident that it could increase production to 475,000 vehicles of all kinds by December 1948 without undertaking the "abnormal" capital expenditure that standardisation might entail. At this rate they could meet their export target, and home requirements of 100,000 cars a year, for the next three years.⁶¹

But this calculation assumed that they would get all the steel they needed. Although the Ministry of Supply accepted that standardisation must take second place to exports, the proposed 1948 steel quota allowed for home sales of not more than 100,000 cars. Two months later the Ministry of Supply and the SMMT were locked in argument about how many cars could physically be made from the steel earmarked for the industry in 1948. The Ministry of Supply insisted that there was enough for well over 300,000 cars (the current rate); the industry replied that the figure would be at most 260,000 (which they contrasted with their maximum *capacity* of 400,000). The problem was discussed at NACMMI, where it was finally agreed that the Ministry of Supply's figures were feasible.⁶²

Production in 1948 was well up on the year before, as were exports, and home sales actually fell (although not before the Ministry of Supply had threatened that smaller firms who failed to export their quota would no longer be given steel unless they agreed to stop building cars).⁶³ The quota itself had now been raised to 75 per cent; forced by the government on a reluctant industry, this optimistic target was never met. Even in 1948 only 60 per cent of production was exported, and from then on, against the background of an insatiable home demand for cars,* the gap between promise and performance grew steadily larger. The target remained at 75 per cent; the Ministry of Supply tried to encourage rather than threaten manufacturers to reach it – by no longer insisting that it be hit quarter by quarter, by promising increased steel allotments in return for hard currency exports, finally by agreeing to negotiate individual targets, firm by firm. There was a massive jump in exports after devaluation in 1949, but the figures fell off again and thereafter remained about static. Standardisation, and a British 'people's car', became only a dream. At the end of 1947 a joint SMMT/Supply

* And interest in them. The first post-war Motor Show in 1948 was visited by over half a million people – more than double any pre-war attendance.

announcement proposed standardisation of accessories and components.⁶⁴ When in 1949 the Minister of Supply was asked whether he would regard the breakdown of the expected Austin/Morris merger as a breach of the industry's promise to standardise, he replied that as far as he knew standardisation was going ahead "reasonably well".⁶⁵ Asked another question in early 1951, he answered: "The application of the principles of standardisation is a matter for each industry. Although I have no detailed information of the progress which the motor industry has made, I am satisfied that it is giving close and energetic attention to the problem."⁶⁶

NACMMI's view that the lower income groups would prefer to buy larger cars even though they used more petrol was not based on any first-hand observation of contemporary motoring habits. The so-called 'basic' petrol ration, available from June 1945, had been aimed to allow only 150 miles' motoring a month (although extra supplies were available for business users and those with special claims). It was increased to 180 miles in March 1946, and to 270 the same August. But in October 1947 it was withdrawn altogether; it was restored only in June 1948, and then at the rate of only 90 miles a month. For the pre-war motorist, these were real limits; the average annual mileage of private cars in the late 1930s had been estimated at 7,000. The ration was doubled during the summer of 1949, and rationing was finally abolished in May 1950.

The view that the lower income groups would be able to buy large cars, or indeed cars at all, also looked beyond the present. Throughout the whole period of the two post-war Labour governments, car deliveries to the home market were never higher than just over 150,000 a year (and in some years a good deal lower). By contrast with petrol, the rationing of cars was left entirely to the trade. Neither scheme was perfect. Their imperfections, and their existence at all, roused the most intense feelings; perhaps more nearly at this period than at any other, there was a genuine and identifiable public opinion about the car, its distribution and its use.

There was little public complaint about the petrol ration during the first two years of its life, and the less so since within a year of its introduction it was nearly doubled. This made its withdrawal in the autumn of 1947 all the less acceptable. The motoring organisations' Standing Joint Committee, refused a hearing by the Prime Minister, issued a statement protesting against the view of the car-user as a 'pleasure motorist'. Most of those who had been getting the basic

ration, the SJC claimed, were of moderate means, using their cars for domestic and business purposes.⁶⁷ By the end of October 2½ million people were said to have signed an SJC petition regretting the abolition of the ration and asking for its restoration, even at only half the previous level.⁶⁸

These arguments were to last as long as the ration. With a Labour government in office, one of the most frequent lines of criticism was that the petrol ration was a sectional and class measure – “class discrimination of the basest sort”, as one Tory MP complained in 1950.⁶⁹ “The government does not seem to like motorists very much,” Brendan Bracken declared in May 1948.⁷⁰ Labour usually replied that many wage-earners also owned cars (although during one debate in 1950 the member for West Fife, suggested that his constituents did not care whether petrol was rationed or not, since none of them were motorists),⁷¹ but that the economic situation allowed of no choice. The Pedestrians’ Association described the protests against the abolition of the ration as “one of the most interesting social phenomena of modern times”.⁷²

But although the government could do nothing to meet these protests, they were well aware of them. In January 1948 the head of the Treasury’s Economic Information Unit was advising the Chancellor, Cripps, on a forthcoming broadcast speech. He pointed out that there had been many new personal deprivations in the past year, most notably the abolition of the basic petrol ration. “Some reference to these in a very sympathetic way, associating the Government with the citizens’ wish to be rid of them, would be helpful.” Cripps himself drafted a passage referring to “the very real hardship and inconvenience” caused by the abolition. It is a nice example of Treasury caution – and perhaps of their persisting views about the motor car – that in the final version the reference to “hardship” was struck out.⁷³

If the ration itself caused resentment, there was at least as much political interest in the arrangements allowing extra supplies for special groups. There seems to have been less public comment about the largest of these groups, the ‘business’ users, than about any others. This was probably because this group included a very large proportion of motorists – estimated at about a million (approximately half of all motorists) by 1948. By the late 1940s anything up to a third of the remainder were also receiving supplementary rations on various grounds. There were many efforts to extend these

grounds for the benefit of holiday resorts, rural areas and other special groups. Refusals were unpopular, but almost as much trouble was caused by acceptances. In early 1948 Gaitskell, the Minister of Fuel and Power, told his incredulous back-benchers that "on the recommendation of the responsible agricultural executive committee, regional petroleum offices grant allowances of petrol to masters of hounds for purposes connected with the hunt".⁷⁴ (Later in this debate complaints were heard that no less than thirty gallons of petrol a month were allowed to the Quantock staghounds, which, it was alleged, were controlled from a chauffeur-driven car.⁷⁵ Two hundred MPs signed a motion protesting against the allocation of extra petrol for stag-hunting and other blood sports.)⁷⁶ New concessions continued to be made; the following year Gaitskell told the House that he was prepared to grant small allowances to hotels in "exceptionally isolated rural areas" to enable them to drive guests to a river or loch where the hotel had fishing rights.⁷⁷

It could be argued, given the large number of such special cases and of 'business' users, that the distribution of petrol was determined less by the formal rationing scheme than by occupation. Motoring, as the result of government policy, was still a middle-class activity. This argument was taken to its logical conclusion by Harold Lever, MP, who suggested that petrol should no longer be rationed by an artificial and expensive points system, but by the free play of market forces. Much private motoring was not a necessity, but a convenience, and those enjoying it should be prepared to pay an economic price.⁷⁸

The Conservatives agreed with Lever that points rationing of petrol was wrong. It was still in force at the General Election of 1950, and provided Churchill (speaking in support of his son, Randolph, at Devonport) with the chance to make a classic post-war Tory statement about the private car:

People are not necessarily 'lower than vermin' because by their skill and thrift they have earned and saved enough money to buy a car or motor cycle. I earnestly hope that cheap cars and motor cycles will be available in this land before many years have passed. We realise the deprivation and often hardship involved in the strict rationing of petrol which the Socialist Government have enforced, and we are determined to put an end to it at the earliest possible moment. . . . We believe that . . . it may soon be all right for a government concerned with the interests of owners of motor cars and motor cycles at any rate to increase greatly the basic ration. . . .⁷⁹

Geoffrey Lloyd, speaking the same day, went even further in avowing that the Tories not only would greatly increase the ration if they got in, but would have done so had they got in in 1945.⁸⁰

The Labour government in fact ended rationing in May. As a preliminary, the petrol tax had been doubled to 1s. 6d. in the Budget. Government speakers explaining this move showed some confusion about whether it was aimed at motorists as such or whether it was simply one way among others of raising revenue. Cripps' remarks suggested that he had taken Harold Lever's advice; he explained that "the time has come when some other methods of restricting consumption of petrol, such, for instance, as the shortage of vehicles, are disappearing, so that fiscal inducements to economy have become necessary". Gaitskell, in reply to Opposition attacks on the government's "anti-motorist" policy, added that it had been necessary to increase the petrol tax in order to reduce income tax; most motorists would gain more from the one change than they would lose from the other. This explanation did not save the House of Commons from some emotional appeals from Messrs. Selwyn and Geoffrey Lloyd on behalf of the modern motorist of small means, the working-class motorist who paid for the upkeep of his car out of pennies saved in an old tin on the mantelshef.⁸¹

But the Tories, themselves in office a year later, followed an identical policy. In his first Financial Statement the Chancellor, R. A. Butler, made it clear that the government had rejected rationing as a means of restricting petrol consumption. Less than half the current consumption of petrol, he said in words which echoed the claims of the motoring organisations over the years, was by private motorists – "and not very much of this is used for pleasure motoring".⁸² (The *Economist* calculated at about this time that perhaps as much as four-fifths of the petrol used in private cars was used for business and professional purposes.)⁸³ Later the same year the petrol tax was again sharply increased, Butler explaining that this was the only alternative to rationing.⁸⁴

Apart from the exceptional six months following the Suez affair, petrol rationing coincided entirely with Labour administrations. The rationing of cars themselves was to last rather longer, ending amid a flurry of complaints from dissatisfied would-be car-owners. Since it was impossible to subdivide motor cars, like petrol, according to the demand, some people had to go without; probably no system of rationing could have entirely avoided the complaints to which this

one gave rise. The allocation of cars among customers was left entirely to the trade, although the trade agreed with the government to give priority to doctors, district nurses, midwives and vets sponsored by the National Veterinary Medical Association (and not, as government spokesmen were to insist in the face of repeated complaints, to public officials).⁸⁵ The scheme rested on an undertaking drawn up by the Motor Traders' Association, and signed by buyers, by which the buyers promised not to resell a new car within a year.⁸⁶ These arrangements were not wholly successful; the undertaking was frequently either disregarded altogether, or observed only to the extent that the car was sold after a year and a day. Consequently there was a steady supply of fairly new used cars into the open market – where prices soared to anything up to twice the price of the car when new. There was much suspicion of those who, like doctors, were privileged to buy new cars, and who were widely said – sometimes with truth – to be making large sums by turning in their car every year.

The motor industry blamed the whole situation on the government's failure to allocate enough cars to the home market. But, under pressure from the Ministry of Supply, they modified the scheme in 1950 by extending the period of the 'covenant' to two years, and by asking dealers not to sell new cars to anyone "who has already had a new post-war car of any make which is still in good running order, or who has disposed of such a car".⁸⁷ (This was intended to defeat the profiteering 'doctors'.) The government, pressed to act against abuses, replied only by referring to this arrangement.

There were also, understandably, demands for action to bring down the cost of second-hand cars. The flat-rate tax which came into effect in January 1948 did not apply to older cars (if first registered before 1947). There were continual requests for it to be extended to do so. In 1949 the motoring organisations' SJC submitted a memorandum to the Treasury arguing that government policy made it hard to get new cars, and that "in the main motor cars are owned by persons of moderate means and used for purposes of utility". At the 1950 General Election, all candidates received another SJC document which declared that "the owners of old cars are in fact denied new vehicles in the national interest and then penalised for not having them."⁸⁸

In both years the proposal was put forward in the Finance Bill

debates, and rejected by the government on the simple grounds that the concession would cost the Exchequer too much. It came up again in 1951.⁸⁹ Joynson-Hicks * now argued that the higher tax on old cars fell mainly on the poorer motorist. A Labour Member, Edelman, agreed that the owners of older cars were not "the decayed aristocracy driving about in decrepit Rolls-Royces". Another Conservative, Heald, said: "This is an example, a remnant, of the old bogus class warfare of Socialism. The Chancellor does not even yet realise that there are millions of people, on whose votes he depends, who own cars and who are hit by the tax. I hope they will take the opportunity of hitting him." The Chancellor, Gaitskell, replied in words which Churchill at the Treasury twenty-five years before might not have disowned. Who would benefit from the concession? Was it justified, given all the other claims on resources? He disagreed with Edelman and Heald:

Primarily it will be the owners of the larger horse-power cars who will benefit. . . . I know very few poor motorists who own large 20 horse-power and 30 horse-power cars. (*Hon. Members*: 'Oh!') Hon. Members may think they are poor by some standards of their own, but they are not poor in relation to the general body of taxpayers. . . ."

He had himself increased the likely truth of this remark by the increase, announced in the same Budget, of purchase tax to 66½ per cent, the level at which it remained until October 1955.

The Conservatives found no new formulas for adjusting the supply of cars to the demand. What brought to an end the whole system of restraints and covenants was the total breakdown of the government's attempts to direct production into export markets. There had been a 25 per cent increase in output between 1949 and 1950, but home deliveries had actually fallen. When in 1951 a steel shortage brought total production down again, the loss was entirely in exports: home deliveries increased. They increased enormously in each of the next four years.

At first, the complaints continued much as before. A back-bench Labour MP, Miss Elaine Burton (Coventry South) took an especial interest in the whole problem. In an adjournment debate in March

* The younger son of the pre-war motoring spokesman and Home Secretary, himself a member of the AA Committee (and later its Chairman), and MP for Chichester, 1942-58.

1952, she demanded that the government should act, as the previous government had failed to, to control second-hand car prices, to prevent prospective customers putting their names on several dealers' lists at once, and to regulate the distribution of cars to wholesalers.⁹⁰ As an example of the collapse of the existing system she quoted a complaint about a family of six who now owned six post-1949 cars. The government's reply was that they were in consultation with the trade (who had written to Miss Burton, referring to the "distressing preoccupation of Parliamentarians with an issue which is already being taken care of . . . [and] which could scarcely benefit from Parliamentary interference"), and that they hoped for fairer distribution in future. In April the SMMT announced new arrangements: customers' declaration about their ownership of post-war cars, and their statements of reasons for wanting a new one, were to be filed centrally with the Motor Trade Association. A false declaration might give ground for legal action.⁹¹

But this refinement of the system was also the beginning of the end. By the end of the year the whole elaborate apparatus had dissolved. The government had started with the declared intention of actually reducing the number of cars available for the home market; in January the Chancellor announced that the industry would be asked to release only 60,000 cars at home in 1952, compared with 110,000 the year before.⁹² (In 1951 new registrations had in fact risen to 140,000.) But although the *Economic Survey*,⁹³ published in April, forecast that shortage of steel would probably mean a reduced output of cars, by June the Minister of Supply had been forced to abandon the plans so firmly announced six months before:

In order to give motor manufacturers a greater incentive to export vehicles, I have agreed with the industry that the home quota should no longer be a fixed figure, but should be calculated as a proportion of output. The industry have undertaken to endeavour to export not less than 80 per cent of their output of passenger cars.

Even as it stood, this meant that 90,000 cars would be available at home. The *Economist* commented scornfully that this apparent abandonment of the government's policy had been necessary to "prevent the unedifying spectacle of actual deliveries outstripping the quota by a margin of 100 per cent".⁹⁴

It was a fair comment. By the autumn, the government had to

admit that home deliveries were far higher than had been expected, and to accept publicly that while restrictions in overseas markets lasted, more cars might have to be sold at home. At the end of 1952, new registrations were up by a third on the year before, at 191,000; exports, at 60 per cent of production, were well down. There was now no need for elaborate conditions for sale and resale of cars, even had they been acceptable to trade and public opinion. By mid-summer the trade had decided to abolish the covenant scheme for some types of car; by August second-hand prices were falling rapidly; in December, when only fourteen models of car were still covered by the scheme, its scope was reduced from two years to one; in January 1953 it was abolished altogether.⁹⁵

Even allowing for the very real difficulties in export markets, it had been a strikingly abrupt switch from austerity to affluence. This was perhaps the moment at which the motor car finally ceased to symbolise mere extravagance and became instead one of the most characteristic attributes of a modern industrial society: no longer a luxury, but an indicator of economic prosperity. The change is strikingly summarised in the entirely new tone of a passage from the *Economist* in October 1952. If this passage seems merely to strike a perfectly conventional mid-century note, it is worth remembering the attitude of the same paper towards the motor car, and its users, and its makers, throughout the previous forty years and indeed up till the late 1940s. The *Economist's* anonymous writer declared:

For fifty years, motoring has been overtaxed. Motor cars have been treated as if they were visible symbols of the selfishness of arrogant wealth. That attitude largely explains the wasted years between the wars, when the development of the motor industry and of roads was strangled by taxation. If, instead, automobile development had been encouraged, some millions of man-years wasted in unemployment might have been used to good account, and by 1939 this country would have been equipped with a greater engineering industry, a fine road system, a stronger balance of payments, and a significantly higher standard of living. A policy of encouragement could enable the industry over the next thirty years to play a part in the affairs of the nation comparable to the contribution of the automobile industry to American life. . . .⁹⁶

16

NO UNREASONABLE RESTRICTIONS

The later 1950s

The policies of post-war governments bore heavily on the private car, and it is natural to try to detect some kind of underlying views about the car as such. But in fact there are few signs that at this time even the parties thought of the car in any terms other than economic and financial. Virtually the only exception to this was, as before the war, the question of cars at elections. The 1944 Speaker's Conference had rejected a resolution put forward by its Labour members which would have limited the number of cars allowed to be used, and there was no reference to the question in the government's Representation of the People Bill in 1948. But when in discussion a new clause was moved to ban cars at elections altogether, the government, although not accepting it as it stood, confessed that they were sympathetic in principle. In face of the familiar objections from the Conservatives, a government clause was inserted limiting each candidate to one car per 2,500 voters in boroughs, per 1,500 in counties (a considerably more restrictive ration than the one in the 1931 Bill).¹

Of course, even a decision about levels of motor taxation implies a view of how far it is legitimate, and politically practicable, to tax car ownership. But, as the industry and commentators have often observed, motor taxation policy seems to have been dictated entirely by the need for revenue. In the years immediately after the war, there was virtually no need to think in ideological terms about the motor car; governments used it simply as an economic weapon, and exploited the world demand for cars by insisting that the industry should export as much of its output as public (and industry) opinion would allow. In any case by the late 1940s the demand for cars was so great that it seemed barely affected by official measures. 1951 saw the doubling of purchase tax; but the annual increase in new registrations from that year on brought them by 1955 to over three and a half times their 1951 level. The vehicle tax was raised in 1953,

to offset the loss of revenue from finally bringing older cars into a single system; but an increase from £10 to £12. 10s. od. a year was, in the circumstances, insignificant. Total revenue from motor taxation rose from £106 million in 1947 to £423 million in 1955. It was undeniable that throughout the late 1940s car ownership was a privilege of the rich; although in general the basic prices of new cars were in real terms rather lower than they had been before the war, they were inflated by high levels of purchase tax. Second-hand prices, which were never controlled, were relatively very high. New cars became available only slowly; of the 2½ million cars in use at the end of 1950, less than a third had been first registered since the war.

In artificially keeping down the numbers of cars on British roads, governments for the time being could control the various problems which cars created: the need for road space, for instance, or for action on road safety. It is striking to note, as a crude indicator of their political significance, how little discussion of either of these problems there was in Parliament in the first five or six years after the war. In general, the whole notion of 'the motorist' – his rights, his privileges, his behaviour, his regulation – sank out of sight; it inevitably took second place to the question of how to get the motorist back into circulation again, and thus to topics such as the petrol ration, export targets and steel allocations, supplies of new cars and taxation of old ones. The private motorists briefly lost importance to other road-users, who were much less hard hit by the war. In 1946 there were more buses than there had been in 1939. There were many more goods vehicles. There were fewer motor cycles, but they had been dwindling since the later 1920s. Cars did not reach their 1939 level again until 1949; in those ten years, goods vehicles had doubled. Although even in the worst of the post-war years, total petrol consumption was almost as high as in the best years of the 1930s, it was not the private motorist who was using it; the Ministry of Transport estimated that in 1949 goods vehicles ran 13 miles for every 11 run by private cars – a complete reversal of the pre-war position.²

For the time being government policy obscured the size of the problems which the motor car was going to create. Pre-war estimates of future car populations had tried to establish some kind of relationship between ownership and income distribution, and had come up with forecasts of 'saturation point', often in the near future, based on this. But although there naturally is such a relationship,

it has changed over time. Ownership has risen much faster than incomes for various reasons.* For instance, calculations of the household income needed to own and run a car could not take account of the number of cars run for business purposes, and thus either wholly or partly paid for by employers or at least tax deductible. Nobody knew how many such cars there were; guesses varied from 50 to 80 per cent of all cars in use.† Nor could anyone foresee the enormous growth in hire purchase. The first official statistics, for 1953, showed that 9 per cent of new cars were bought on hire purchase, and about six times as many used cars; by 1956 both figures had nearly doubled, and by the end of the 1960s a quarter of new cars were bought in this way. More important still, prophets of car population could not have envisaged how far changing social habits and changing attitudes to the car would soon make their numerical yardsticks irrelevant. (In particular, the idea that increasing traffic congestion will discourage either the buying or the use of cars has always proved a powerfully misleading tool.) The result was that for at least fifteen years after the war official estimates of future increases in traffic were far too low:

In 1945 the Ministry [of Transport] estimated that traffic increases by 1965 would be 75 per cent over 1933 figures in urban areas and 45 per cent more in rural areas; but by 1950 – five years later – the number of vehicles had already nearly doubled compared with 1933. In 1954 the Ministry told highway authorities to plan for a 75 per cent increase in traffic by 1974. But by 1962 the number of vehicles was already 75 per cent above the 1954 figure. In 1957, the Ministry forecast that there would be eight million vehicles by 1960; but there were nine million. In 1959, the Ministry of Transport forecast that there would be twelve and a half million vehicles by 1969; but this figure was passed before the end of 1964.⁵

Views about the relationship of motoring to both class and income – and probably also the residual notion that car ownership is a luxury of which the state, in providing for the necessities of life,

* In the early 1960s it was calculated that the national 'car stock' (the money value of all cars on the road) was closely related to the level of average personal incomes, after tax. But it increased faster than incomes: for every rise of 1 per cent in incomes, the car stock rose by 2.4 per cent, while other factors produced an additional annual increase of about 3 per cent.³

† In October 1962 the official Social Survey found that 15 per cent of cars were owned by firms, 12 per cent by self-employed workers, while another 10 per cent were privately registered but partly subsidised by firms.⁴

need take no account – were built into the provision of garage space and of roads in public housing developments. For years after 1945 the Ministry of Transport calculated that in New Towns on average one garage space was necessary for every four houses. (Public housing estates built between the wars had often provided no garages at all.)⁶ A survey promoted by the AA in 1965 showed that of those who had owned cars since before 1945 (i.e., in effect, since before the war) nearly 70 per cent were in the top social classes, A, B, and C1. Of those who had owned cars only since 1956 nearly 60 per cent were in the bottom classes, C2 and DE.⁷ The relationship between these two proportions is not a surprising one, but it shows well how misleading were bound to be any views about the future of the motor car which merely built on pre-war experience.

There was, for the moment, no effective pressure to spend money on roads. In May 1946 the government had announced a three-stage highway programme, aimed at promoting road safety, helping industrial and urban development, reducing traffic congestion, and increasing agricultural efficiency.⁸ This was, at last, an official response to the statements which road transport spokesmen had been addressing to governments for at least twenty years. But in the event it came to nothing. From 1947 on, economic crisis pushed roads expenditure into the background; between 1948 and 1953, the average annual expenditure on maintenance and minor improvements was in real terms only 66 per cent of the average between 1936 and 1938; expenditure on major improvements and new construction was a mere 21 per cent.^{9*}

But the motor car continued to create problems. The most obvious was London traffic congestion, the city's perennial problem in the ages of the motor and the horse alike. Abercrombie's County of London plan, published in 1943, had proposed various improvements in the city's roads, including a series of concentric 'ring' roads, which were to be the basis of some furious arguments in the late 1960s.¹⁰ Few of these proposals had been carried out. Several central streets were already saturated at rush hours. The Ministry of Transport's London and Home Counties Traffic Advisory Committee, concerned at what might happen when both cars and petrol were freely available, set up an enquiry of its own in early 1950 to consider what might be done. Although at this period only 5 per cent

* Legal powers to build motorways were taken under the Special Roads Act, 1949. But the first section of motorway was opened only in December 1958.

of those working in London came in by private car or motor cycle, cars already made up nearly a third of traffic in the centre. The Committee made no suggestions at all for trying to limit this proportion, or the total amount of traffic. All its proposals were in fact aimed at making it possible for the largest possible number of people to use their cars in central London. Trying to keep anybody out would be too difficult; it was also questionable "whether it would be desirable at the present time, after so many years of severely restrictive private motoring, to impose new restrictions on the freedom of movement of private cars in Inner London".*

The Committee's main proposal was for better parking arrangements. Car parks should be built under some squares, while others should be built on land bought partly out of central funds. The charges for using these car parks should be 'nominal', so as to encourage motorists to use them. Once more or less adequate provision had been made for the long-term parker, an experimental scheme of parking-meters should be tried; any profits from these meters should go to the local authority, to be spent on paying for off-street parking accommodation.¹²

Two years later, the Committee's parking proposals were broadly approved by a special working party set up by the Ministry of Transport. This was a classic 'representative' body, including members from the commercial vehicle and bus operators, the motor trade, the motoring organisations, the police, the LCC, the Ministry of Housing and other departments. By now the London traffic situation, like road safety and the roads programme, was becoming a subject of Parliamentary discussion. The kerb space in certain West End streets, 50 per cent full of parked cars in 1951, was 75 per cent full in 1953.¹³ There were questions in the House, and occasional adjournment debates. The Working Party thought that the only answer was to build more garages. Charges for using them should, if possible, be 'acceptable' to motorists and should vary with the size of the car. Any deficit should be made good by the Ministry of Transport - "We can think of no way in which better value could be obtained for a given expenditure than by the removal of [parked private cars] from the streets. . . ."

These were the authentic tones of those who regard the motor car

* As Colin Buchanan pointed out, the Committee also opposed restricting the numbers of buses, coaches, taxis, hire cars or goods vehicles, and recommended restrictions only on the now vanishing horse-drawn vehicle.¹¹

as an irresistible, undeflectable force – a view which was perhaps even more extremely expressed in the Committee's arguments for building car parks under squares, even at the cost of destroying the trees in the squares. The Committee pointed out that trees were 'living organisms' which would need replacing at some time in the natural order of things; that the squares had originally been designed and laid out as open spaces without trees (some engravings of St James's Square in the late eighteenth century were reproduced as proof); and finally, that the squares had changed so much since the eighteenth century that there had already been "an appreciable change in amenities".¹⁴

In a minority report, the representative of the Ministry of Housing, Colin Buchanan, suggested that the squares were too valuable to be destroyed and went on to question the whole principle of subsidising the long-term parker. Might the answer not be to keep him off the streets? If motorists were unwilling to pay the economic costs of parking, they could use public transport. Local authorities would do better to provide for the short-term parker; private enterprise could meet the long-term demand by putting car parks in new buildings.¹⁵

But in the early 1950s such views were, as the Traffic Advisory Committee had recognised, politically unacceptable.* Governments anxious to take the credit for finally ending the era of austerity could not afford to shackle the motor car, now becoming one of the prime symbols of 'normal' times. Labour governments wanted to show that they were not the implacable enemy of the middle-class; Tory ones were determined to prove that there was more room for self-expression under the Conservatives. They were encouraged by commentators like the *Economist*, which in October 1953 urged the government to stimulate the motor industry by deliberately encouraging motoring and by taxing the motorist only as much as was necessary to help finance a liberal road-building policy; the prospect of owning a car would greatly stimulate productivity.¹⁷ These sentiments were supported by the notion, familiar in discussions of speed limits in particular, and increasingly imported into almost any aspect of the 'motor problem', that rules in this field must be fully based on the consent of those affected by them. Thus, when in the

* So, for different reasons, were the Working Party's proposals. Consultants were appointed by the Ministry of Transport to prepare schemes for car parks under selected squares, but their schemes were rejected on the grounds of cost and damage to amenity.¹⁶

summer of 1953 the Ministry of Transport were asked to introduce new 'no waiting' restrictions in central London, the Parliamentary Secretary replied: "It would not be possible in London at present to enforce strictly a law which was not regarded as reasonable in the circumstances by the general body of traders and road-users." He then appealed for the co-operation of 'the motoring public'.¹⁸ Co-operation was a substitute for expenditure, for governments literally could not afford the capital investment necessary to cope with the unrestricted use of the motor car in towns.

The main car-directed activity of governments in these years was in promoting road safety propaganda. This had the political advantage of showing concern at what was still a very real problem, while costing much less than improving the roads (although initially the two were seen as complementary). After an alarming rise during the war, road casualties had fallen back to the levels of the late 1920s. As had not been true in the late 1920s, the situation grew only slowly worse. There was no political weight behind demands for new legislation, and none was to be brought in for nearly ten years. There was plenty of advice available. No action had ever been taken on the report of the Alness Committee. A Ministry of War Transport committee had been set up in 1943, to look at the Alness proposals and to make its own, and had produced an interim report the next year. This suggested: "There is no mystery about the cause of the great majority of road accidents. If we could raise the standard of road manners of all road-users; make the roads really adequate for today and tomorrow; and ensure that the vehicles are always in a roadworthy condition, we should have solved the problem".¹⁹ The Committee thought that much could be done by propaganda. They also recommended that there should be more segregation of different types of traffic, that every police force should have a traffic department, that vehicle-testing stations should be set up, and that there should be no general speed limit. They said nothing about the relationship between the law and accidents.

In the autumn of 1945, the Minister of Transport formally launched a propaganda campaign with the slogan "Keep Death off the Road".²⁰ This was to be carried out jointly with local authorities; the Ministry would pay half the cost of approved road safety committees. When the economic crisis killed the roads programme, this campaign was left as the sole official activity directed towards the motor vehicle. Unfortunately, propaganda is not an uncontroversial

activity; exhortation aimed at preventing road accidents is likely to cause some friction among road-users if only because it cannot avoid implying, however obliquely, some judgements about the causes of the accidents. The Pedestrians' Association's pre-war suspicions of the National Safety First Association did not abate when it changed its name in 1941 to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. During the war, the Pedestrians' Association had expressed some doubts about RoSPA, criticising what they saw as its 'motorist' bias, and pointing out that its chairman was secretary of the Commercial Road Users' Association, while the secretary of the AA was chairman of its road safety committee.²¹ The pedestrians were, as always, deeply suspicious of the assumptions on which road safety propaganda was likely to be based. They had not been represented on the departmental committee, and grumbled that "the motoring interests had been powerful enough to impose on the Ministry the view that excessive speed was not a serious factor in road accidents".²² They saw propaganda as a palliative put forward as an alternative to legislation with teeth; they made much of the findings of a 1946 survey commissioned by the *News Chronicle*, which showed 59 per cent of those questioned favouring a general (though unspecified) speed limit on open roads, and they were critical of the motoring organisations' attempts to have the limits lifted on certain roads.²³

When the Departmental Committee produced its final report in 1948, it recommended among other things that it should be made an offence for a cyclist to ride recklessly and for a pedestrian to fail to obey a traffic signal, and that vehicles should periodically be tested. The motoring organisations' Standing Joint Committee objected to this last proposal and demanded a return to the principles of the Alness Report (based on the view that the solution lay in still better propaganda).²⁴ Both the pedestrians and the cyclists objected to the proposals affecting themselves. However, their scepticism about propaganda was powerfully reinforced by the 1948 findings of the official *Social Survey*, which concluded that the public as a whole was immune to warnings about danger on the roads, and that neither the temperament nor the behaviour of the individual were much affected by visual propaganda.²⁵ *

These wrangles continued for some years. The pedestrians

* A finding which seems to have been ignored ever since.

demanding government intervention in "the scandal of RoSPA"; the cyclists resigned from it, arguing that its publicity rested on the typically motorist's view that "the victims of accidents are themselves to blame".²⁶ When the Estimates Committee discussed road safety in 1953, the Pedestrians' Association submitted a memorandum criticising RoSPA for its motorist views and suggesting that it had been created and was still controlled by representatives of the motoring interests.²⁷ (The Committee summoned spokesmen for RoSPA, the pedestrians, the cyclists, the British Road Federation, the Road Research Laboratory and the Ministry of Transport to give evidence simultaneously; this not surprisingly developed into a furious argument which the chairman finally had to cut short.)²⁸ The Committee concluded that the Ministry of Transport ought to bring the pedestrians, the cyclists and RoSPA together as soon as possible.²⁹ But the following year the pedestrians were again up in arms, pointing out that the new president of RoSPA was the chairman of Vauxhall, and that the chairman of its 'National Road Safety Committee' was also the head of the legal department of the SMMT.³⁰

It is easy to condemn the Pedestrians' Association as fanatical 'anti-motorists', but their suspicions look less unreasonable in the light of an incident involving the Association's own propaganda activities, which oddly recalls an incident of some twenty years before. In 1953 the Association persuaded the Ministry of Transport to commission an anti-drinking poster from RoSPA with the slogan "One for the road may be one for the grave". In Birmingham the local accident prevention council declined to sponsor this poster after a protest from a local brewery. The Birmingham Temperance Society bought some copies of the poster on its own account and put them up at the railway station. But the British Transport Commission had them defaced on the grounds that they were 'knocking copy' and thus in breach of the poster display code. Several Parliamentary Questions were asked about this episode, and finally there was an Adjournment Debate on it. In this the Ministry of Transport, though making clear that it had no direct responsibility, did nothing to suggest that there was any strong policy line on drinking and driving; the Parliamentary Secretary concluded that "instead of concentrating upon the importance of temperance and safety on the roads, these posters chose to criticise even the moderate use of alcohol".³¹

But by 1954 some more positive action to deal with road accidents could not have been long delayed. As in the 1920s, a Bill had been for some time in preparation, started by the Labour government after the final report of the Departmental Committee on road safety, but not ready when they fell in 1951. Since then, its hopes of finding a place in the Parliamentary programme had been further reduced by another similarity with the pre-war scene: the rapid turnover in Ministers of Transport. For Labour, Alfred Barnes had held the post for over six years; in the same length of time the Conservatives had five different Ministers. The first large-scale post-war Parliamentary debate on road safety took place in June 1952.³² The first (very small) special post-war roads programme was by now under way: a £2-million programme for 1952-4 on removing accident blackspots.³³ In December, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Transport announced that the government hoped to bring in a comprehensive road traffic Bill "before too long".³⁴

In 1952, fewer people were killed and injured on the roads than the year before; despite the ending of petrol rationing, the number of cars was growing no faster than in previous years. But in 1953 twice as many new cars came on to the roads as in 1952. Road casualties jumped sharply. As before the war, the law was not only disregarded, but when disregarded was not enforced. Although the maximum fine for a first speeding offence was £20, and £50 for a second, the average fine imposed in all speeding cases in 1952 was £2. 3s. od. In many of the relatively few jury trials of drivers accused of 'manslaughter', the outcome was an absurd acquittal: in the 133 cases tried between 1951 and 1953, there were 41 acquittals, 67 acquittals of manslaughter but convictions of dangerous driving, and a mere 25 convictions for manslaughter.³⁵ The reasons for this, as Elliott and Street observe, were partly that a very high degree of negligence was needed for a manslaughter conviction, partly that juries could not bring themselves to convict a mere motorist of such a 'barbarous-sounding' crime.³⁶

Courts also still showed leniency towards offenders who could claim that they drove for a living. On the other hand, the decision in a 1946 case had made inadmissible many of the ludicrous pleas offered in successful defence of motorists before the war (as in the case of the King's radiologist): in *Whittall v. Kirby* the magistrates decided not to disqualify a driver whom they had convicted of drunken driving, on the grounds that he was a first offender, that he

drove for a living and that they had imposed an unusually heavy fine. They were overruled by the Divisional Court, who declared that reasons must be "special to the offence and not to the offender" (in other words, it would be no defence for a motorist charged with going through a red light to plead that he was the King's radiologist: he would need to show that he was at the time hurrying to give the King urgent radiological treatment).³⁷

In July 1953 the whole of a Supply Day debate was given over to discussing road safety. (The discussion was the usual mixture which had been familiar in the past, and soon would be again: personal anecdotes, tributes to and criticisms of the road safety campaign, attempts to compare road casualty statistics with those suffered in the Korean war or with the population of large towns.³⁸) In November the Queen's Speech announced that Ministers were "attentively examining the Road Traffic Acts with a view to introducing further legislation to improve road safety and promote the orderly use of roads".³⁹ This kind of indefinite promise was familiar enough from the 1920s. So too was the explanation given by the Minister of Transport, three months later, of delays in bringing in a Bill: "There are certain proposals involving the police and local authorities as well as road-users on which I shall need to consult the representative bodies concerned before I can proceed further."⁴⁰ By the autumn of 1954 there were three million cars on the roads; for the year as a whole, road deaths and injuries combined were up to the highest pre-war level. (They have never again fallen below it.) When, in the autumn, the Opposition criticised the government's failure to build on their own work, the reply made it clear only that there would be no Bill that session.⁴¹

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From about this time on, the 'motor problem' begins to develop into something more uniform, but much more complex, in which the treatment of the private car becomes inextricably entangled with that of every other sort of vehicle. Before the war, there had been several well-defined aspects to the motor problem. Some of them (the effect of taxation on design and exports) centred exclusively, others (road accidents, speed limits) mainly on the car. There were other problems, of concern to road-users in general (the raids on the Road Fund), on which the private motorists made most of the running, and were perceived to be doing so by policy-makers. Still

others were of little interest to the motorists (the hauliers' struggle with the railways, or the attempts to regulate the bus operators). Some of these – or their direct descendants – continued to be live issues after the war. But in the mid-1950s, as motor vehicles of every kind grew in numbers, many of these individual problems were assimilated to a single, new and all-embracing problem – traffic.

Much of traffic was cars (in 1955 they accounted for 60 per cent of all motor vehicles other than motor cycles). But the problem was so complex precisely because of the interaction of cars and other vehicles; it concerned not one single group of road-users, but all of them at once. If private cars and vital commercial traffic were holding each other up, was the answer to build more roads (to be used by still more cars), or to try to make some sort of distinction between cars and other traffic? Solutions of the second kind would at least have called for some expression of views about the place of the car. But in general such solutions were avoided as far as possible. Consequently, policy towards the car as such has remained distinctly ambiguous. Once traffic and its control becomes *the* Motor Problem, it becomes much harder to isolate and to analyse the views of policy-makers about the car.

In December 1953 the Minister of Transport announced that government expenditure in the next three years on new road construction and improvement was to be increased.⁴² (The actual increase in the next year was negligible.) It took another year for the Ministry of Transport to bring forth the Road Traffic Bill. In December 1954 the Queen's Speech deliberately linked road safety and roads expenditure. Ministers were described as greatly concerned at the grievous toll of road accidents, at the inadequacy of the highway system and at the damage done to the national economy by congestion and delays. They had therefore decided on "an expanded programme of road construction and improvement", to increase safety and to help traffic to flow more freely. The Road Traffic Acts would be amended to the same ends.⁴³

The Bill started in the House of Lords in December 1954.⁴⁴ It brought together various proposals made at different times by different bodies. It followed the 1948 Departmental Committee in proposing the compulsory testing of vehicles, as well as penalties for cyclists and pedestrians. After nearly twenty years, it made the speed limit permanent. It increased the penalties for speeding (from

a maximum of £20 for a first offence, to one of £30); for dangerous driving (from £50 for a first offence, to £100); and for careless driving (from £20 for a first offence, to £40). It followed the 1953 Working Party in proposing to give the Minister of Transport powers to introduce an 'experimental' scheme of parking-meters, the revenue from which was to go towards providing off-street parking.

This last provision was the outcome of a bargain struck between the Ministry of Transport and the motoring organisations. The AA and RAC were basically opposed to meters, and had protested against proposals to introduce an experimental scheme in Manchester. But they had said little on the subject in public recently, and so when their views were sought by the Ministry of Transport in 1954 there was room for manoeuvre. The Minister, Boyd-Carpenter, personally discussed his proposals with them and persuaded them to accept meters in principle on condition that the revenue was used only to provide additional parking space (the arrangement suggested by the LHCTAC committee in 1951).⁴⁵ This was in effect a return to the principles of the Road Fund; and, like the Road Fund, it was to remain an albatross round the necks of Ministers of Transport and local authorities for years to come.

It would have been hard to justify this Bill in terms of a coherent set of underlying principles; and although the *Economist* commented that it ended the era of *laissez-faire* for road-users,⁴⁶ the government made no such claims for it. They presented the Bill as non-partisan. They declared themselves entirely neutral; the Bill was experimental in nature, and they would welcome any advice from any quarter on how it might be improved. They did not want to push ahead too fast in imposing new regulations upon road-users, in whose courtesy and self-discipline the solution must lie. What was more, although the Bill did impose some new restrictions, these were aimed at balancing the differing interests of the several classes of road-user; no group need feel unduly hard hit by the Bill.⁴⁷ The Labour Opposition in the Lords replied that they, too, had no firm policy on road safety. But they were critical of some details of the Bill. Vehicle-testing would probably be more trouble than it was worth. (Lord Jowitt suggested that the best way to keep one's car in good order was to do as he did, and replace it yearly.) Testing should not be left to private garages, since it was wrong in principle for private enterprise to be concerned with issuing certificates required by

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statute. The Bill was as basically confused, and added more petty restrictions to the many already on the statute book.⁴⁸

Other interests and individuals made their predictable points. The motoring organisations publicly agreed to accept parking-meters if the revenue went to off-street parking. They were against compulsory testing. They too objected to using private garages, but on the grounds that these might exploit car-owners; a better system would be for owners to be required to declare that their vehicles were road-worthy before they could get insurance cover, backed up with voluntary testing arrangements. They were opposed to increasing maximum penalties; if the government wanted to raise average penalties, that was a matter for the Home Office and the police.⁴⁹ They were also opposed to the speed limit in its existing form. In a press handout the AA commented that "a law which frequently appears to be unnecessary or absurd is nearly always unenforceable". They suggested that the 30-mph limit had been introduced "in a hurry" in 1934 and had been applied in far too wholesale a manner.⁵⁰ The pedestrians objected that the maximum fine for a disobedient pedestrian was £20, while a driver who ignored a pedestrian on a crossing might not be fined more than £5.⁵¹ (The government later agreed to make both maxima £10.) Some points of view put forward by the cyclists were greeted with the comment that the government were mesmerised by the voting power of the cyclists' unions – which, added another speaker, were the most powerful lobby in the country.⁵²

The government acted on their promise to welcome attempts to improve the Bill. At least twenty amendments of substance were accepted as it passed through the Lords. Among these was a proposal to create a new offence of 'causing death by reckless or dangerous driving', which aimed to get round the reluctance of juries to convict drivers of manslaughter. This had been supported by several speakers, including Lord Goddard, who recalled having pressed for this change in the 1930s. The Lord Chancellor commented that the Bill aimed to strike a balance between drivers and pedestrians, and that he had thought the House might feel that to accept the amendment would tip the Bill too far against the driver. Since their comments showed that they did not feel this, he would have a new clause prepared.⁵³ Lord Brabazon, a representative of another age of motoring (he recalled with some bitterness the government's broken promise of 1934 to lift the speed limit at night

if the motorists would accept it by day), suggested that the law should formally distinguish between driving while drunk and merely being 'in charge of' a car. (As the law stood, drunken owners had been convicted on the strength of simply having their car keys in their possession.) The government promised to try to meet this point.⁵⁴

The government's willingness to amend their own Bill did not commend it to its critics, even among the Peers. In the Lords Third Reading debate it was attacked not merely as timid and unimaginative in conception, but now completely confused in form.⁵⁵ Much the same complaints were heard in the House of Commons.⁵⁶ Boyd-Carpenter argued that the Bill was coherent and logically related to other road safety measures. At the same time, although some of its requirements were bound to cause resentment, it did not yet necessarily strike the right balance in every clause. He appealed to the House for help. The provisions about tests, for instance, were "eminently a matter on which the government would wish to have the views of the House", and the Bill as a whole was concerned "largely with matters which turn so much on judgement and experienced opinion rather than on political predisposition". To this Callaghan, for the Opposition, objected that the Bill was a "miserable" product of so many years' work, and would save few lives. He suggested that the government were so anxious to hear the views of the House because they had none of their own. And if they really wanted to hear everyone's views, why did they not keep the Bill on the floor of the House rather than sending it to Committee? Another member complained that the government had let the Lords do their best to turn the Bill into a "motoring measure", and (inconsistently) that if it were really an all- or non-party measure, its drafting should have been left to Parliament, not decided by the executive. In a somewhat lethargic debate, only Mr Douglas Houghton appeared to approve of the Bill as a whole. He thought it did as much as was practicable in this difficult field which aroused so many emotions and brought so many different interests to bear on Parliament.⁵⁷

Discussion of the Bill progressed no further, for in May Parliament was dissolved for a General Election. The Conservatives were returned with a comfortable majority, and later in the summer the Bill was introduced again. It was in outline much the same, but the compulsory vehicle-testing provisions had now been written out, and other concessions were to be made later. This time the Bill was

introduced in the Commons, where Boyd-Carpenter once again pleaded that it was not intended to embody a comprehensive policy, to support a range of other road safety activities.⁵⁸ The Opposition – supported by the *Manchester Guardian*⁵⁹ – criticised the government for not taking the chance, at the start of a new Parliament, to bring in a new and re-thought measure. Having allowed the earlier version of the Bill an unopposed Second Reading, they voted solidly against its successor. The government's attitude was still conciliatory. For much of the time in committee, the Whips were off, and more amendments were accepted. Thus Boyd-Carpenter agreed to delete the proposals to increase the penalty for speeding, commenting that penalties ought not to get out of line with public opinion.⁶⁰

The Bill dragged its way through the Commons committee throughout the winter of 1955–6. In December, Boyd-Carpenter was replaced by Watkinson, who, after a seven-hour discussion of a compromise proposal by the government to replace compulsory vehicle-testing by occasional spot-checks, finally agreed to take powers to compel tests for cars over ten years old.⁶¹ There was again much discussion of parking-meters, about which all MPs had been lobbied by the SJC. The motoring organisations – apparently regretting their earlier acquiescence in a proposal which many of their members were likely to resent – had changed their tactics during the summer, and in October had opened a full-scale publicity campaign against meters. This was not wholly effective, being sharply criticised in the press, for instance by the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Manchester Guardian* (which commented that the campaign discredited the motorists' case). It also roused some hostile reactions among MPs; in the Commons committee discussions, Mr George Strauss declared it “monstrous” of the organisations to put forward such views on behalf of their members, and Mr David Renton, himself a member of the AA's governing committee, attacked the whole SJC campaign as inaccurate and misleading.⁶² The Ministry of Transport invited the organisations to confidential discussions on the proposals, in which Watkinson himself took part. The SJC, in return, promised to drop the campaign, although feeling bound to continue to oppose meters in Parliament.⁶³

By the spring of 1956 the organisations were once again wooing the press. In March the Ministry of Transport set up a working party to discuss the details of introducing meters. This was at first

intended to be a 'representative' body, and the SJC were invited to nominate a member. But soon after, the Ministry of Transport – realistically, given the organisations' current views about meters – withdrew the invitation and set up the working party as a purely official body, including Ministry of Transport, local government and police representatives.⁶⁴ The SJC continued their opposition, producing an illustrated pamphlet called *The case against parking meters*. In April, another press conference launched a three-week campaign leading up to the Bill's committee stage in the Lords; the SJC argued that traffic problems were mainly caused not by indiscriminate parking, but by inadequate roads.⁶⁵ The meter proposals were passed without difficulty.⁶⁶ The following year the SJC let it be known that although they still objected to meters, they were calling off their active opposition.

The Bill as a whole went through without trouble. It was indeed, as the critics had protested and the government modestly admitted, a far from comprehensive measure, dealing at the margins with a few specific aspects of the road safety problem. The parking-meter provisions were probably the most important part of the Bill; by at last legalising charging for parking on the public highway, they opened the way to the first systematic attempts to regulate the use of cars in city centres. The Act was to be swept up, with all that remained of its predecessors, in another Road Traffic Act only four years later.

The discussions of the Bill had given much scope for the lobbying activities, some of them successful, of the motoring organisations. They and the other roads interest grew increasingly active as, after 1954, the post-war road-building programme at last slowly got under way.

The AA and the RAC had grown steadily in size since the war, and their huge paying memberships gave them greater resources than any other organisations in the roads field. By 1950 the AA had a million members, by 1954 a million and a half. (The RAC kept no record of its membership until the mid-1960s.) Since 1944 the two bodies and the Scottish RAC had been co-ordinating their major political activities through the 'Standing Joint Committee'. It played the part of the pre-war MLC, although without the support of the manufacturers, who now had their own direct links with government. Since the war the SJC had opposed petrol rationing, purchase tax, speed limits on 'utility' vehicles, the

higher rates of taxation on pre-war cars, and the giving of legal force to the Highway Code.⁶⁷

There had been some changes among the other interests concerned with road transport. As buses increasingly came under public control, the bus operators ceased to exist as a significant independent political force. The commercial vehicle operators were not only more important economically, but also better organised; in the battle against nationalisation after 1945 they had reactivated the old Road Haulage Association (which had grown out of the body originally formed to put the hauliers' view to the Royal Commission of 1929/1930), and had kept it in vigorous being ever since. It stood, in its own words, for "the complete freedom of choice in transport services by trade and industry and for full and natural development of each form of transport . . . without fiscal and political distortion."

The collapse and nationalisation of the railways after the war had removed one major threat to road-users of every kind, and brought to an end the bitter arguments between private and commercial motorists about their respective shares of taxation. Interwar Tory governments, as the heirs of the basically Conservative Coalition which in 1919 had lost its nerve about nationalising the railways, had been the uneasy godparents of the sickly creatures which the railways had become. After 1951 the railways' massive capital investment programme and their operating deficits were alike financed by the taxpayer, via the Exchequer, with few questions asked in Parliament or indeed elsewhere.

In general, there were no major disagreements of policy between the private motor interests and the others.* The motor organisations felt able to co-operate with the other interests in road propaganda. They did this through two permanent pressure groups,† the British Roads Federation and the Roads Campaign Council. The BRF had grown out of the conference of roads interests formed to prepare a reply to the 1932 report of the Salter Conference on competition between road and rail; its members included not only most of the

* Although in 1954, in a faint echo of a once familiar theme, a manager of British Road Services suggested that goods traffic already moved so satisfactorily between London and Birmingham by night that the proposed M.1 motorway would offer little commercial advantage; it might simply "saddle industry with the cost of subsidising a motor road to enable private motorists to travel at speed".⁶⁸

† The term for once is apt. The basic aim of both bodies was (and is) to press in every possible way for more and better roads.

obvious road transport organisations, but a huge range of trade associations representing thousands of firms interested both in the use of roads (bakers, grocers, timber merchants, funeral directors) and in their construction (suppliers of equipment and materials). The RCC was set up in 1955, largely on the initiative of the RAC, to organise an intensive publicity campaign for more spending on roads. It was backed by the private motorists' organisations, by the SMMT and the BRF, as well as by the motor agents, the motor cycle interests and the bus operators. Its small staff concentrated on publicity, while the BRF did much of the necessary 'research' work. It was in many ways close to the pre-war Roads Improvement Association, and like the RIA it advised and serviced a non-party Parliamentary group, the Roads Study Group. As before the war, there was much overlapping between the managers of these several organisations; the AA were represented on the governing body of the BRF, as well as – together with a representative of the BRF – on the governing body of the RCC. From the political point of view, the advantage of having bodies specialising in roads promotion was that the interests backing them could unequivocally agree on their objectives throughout, without the uneasy compromises that had sometimes been necessary in the old MLC, or the need to cobble together *ad hoc* 'conferences' to put a collective point of view.⁶⁹

Apart from the major questions of road-building and tax levels, the motorists were by the 1950s fighting most of their battles independently of the industry. Government policy towards the car as a method of transport appeared to be to allow it to develop as fast as its users wanted, provided this did not lead to embarrassing friction with other transport interests. Policy towards the motor car in the transport field has thus a certain *laissez-faire* consistency. In the economic field, by contrast, policy was both quite unrelated to transport policy and, in general, anything but *laissez-faire*. Government's intervention in the running of the industry grew less specific, and the motives for it changed, but its impact remained great. Labour governments had failed to influence the industry's design or production policy but had at least influenced their marketing policy in forcing them to export up to three-quarters of production; their successors lost control of marketing policy, but, taking advantage of the level of post-war demand for cars, used the motor industry, as it has been used ever since, as an instrument for regulating the economy.

Purchase tax, first introduced in 1940, was increased for the more expensive cars in 1947; in the next eleven years the rates were changed eleven times, varying from a low of 25 per cent to 66½ per cent. Hire purchase restrictions were introduced in 1952; in the next sixteen years they were altered seventeen times, varying from complete abolition in October 1958 to a minimum deposit of 50 per cent with only two years to pay the balance. (Petrol tax has been altered almost as often. But with the single exception of the removal of the extra duty imposed after the Suez crisis, every change has been an increase.) The most startling slump in car production since the war was in 1956. With purchase tax at 60 per cent, a minimum deposit of 50 per cent, and petrol rationing following Suez, output fell by over a fifth on the year before, and new registrations by even more. Credit restrictions were relaxed at the end of the year, rationing and the extra tax were removed in the following spring, and production and sales leapt back to their previous levels.

Governments were blamed, with some justice, for these fluctuations. The Conservative governments of the mid-1950s were criticised by the industry from one side, for the industry's troubles, and by the Opposition from the other, for failing to get the industry to meet the export targets which Labour had achieved and which the Tories had at least promised. By 1955 only 38 per cent of production was being exported, compared with 66 per cent in the last full year of Labour government. In the disastrous year that followed, exports did even worse. In these years members of both parties, for different reasons, were demanding inquiries of some kind into the motor industry. The government were unmoved. Their attitude was summed up in a characteristic reply to a Labour demand given by the President of the Board of Trade in 1956: "It is not for any Government to export motor cars; it is for the motor industry to do that."⁷⁰ The criticisms continued. In a long debate in February 1957, MPs of all parties and all temperaments raised most of the arguments about the car and the economy which had been heard since the war.⁷¹ Mr Pannell criticised the recent decision to relax purchase tax while the extra petrol tax was still in force, as there was still "an element of luxury in motor-travel". Mr Shepherd demanded more standardisation in British cars. Mr Chapman insisted that the only way to increase exports was to impose an absolute limit on home sales. Mr Edelman concluded that the only answer to the industry's sickness was nationalisation. Mr Roy Jenkins asked the

government to explain their taxation policy, and put a proposition to them: "The size of the home market which we can have and, in consequence, the sort of motor taxation policy which we can pursue must to quite a large extent be geared to the sort of road development programme which we are proposing to have over the next ten or twenty years."⁷²

The next year the SMMT, looking ahead to the 1960s, hoped that the government would abandon the policy towards motor cars which it had followed in the 1950s – the main feature of which was that the industry could not make out what it was. The motor car, suggested the SMMT, was a "prime-mover of activity and a measure of prosperity". The government, for economic reasons, were limiting the freedom which it could offer. Production and exports of cars would both be encouraged if the government would state in public that they believed the motor vehicle to be essential and socially desirable, that wider car ownership was "a real move towards social advancement", that output should be steadily increased, and that they would reduce the tax burden on the industry as soon as possible.⁷³

Roy Jenkins and the SMMT were to be disappointed. There were no signs in the 1950s (indeed there have been virtually none since) that governments thought of motor taxation policy as relevant to anything other than total levels of consumer demand in the economy. In this, there was nothing to choose between Tories and Labour; apart from Labour criticisms of the industry's failure to export, neither party officially made an issue of any aspect of the motor car, or could afford to promise to do anything about motor taxation except juggle with it as the need arose. A former civil servant has recalled that at about this time a few Treasury officials began to give some thought to the distributive aspects of motor taxation, as well as to the social costs which might be incurred by unrestricted ownership.⁷⁴ But neither they nor Ministers aired this kind of thinking in public. Sir Frank Lee, then Permanent Secretary to the Board of Trade, told the Radcliffe Committee in 1958 that he disapproved of hire purchase controls, but that they possibly had some psychological value in demonstrating government's commitment to a deflationary policy. Whatever their actual significance, "it would look odd if it was thought that credit was being given without restraint in this form for the purchase of motor cars and other goods".⁷⁵ But even when he became joint head of the Treasury his

NO UNREASONABLE RESTRICTIONS

disapproval was not reflected in policy (possibly, as Samuel Brittan has suggested, because he was alone in his views).⁷⁶

Critics saw these measures as reflecting official failure to understand that the car had come to stay. The *Economist* had once written of "the motorists, who have Parliament, and the Press, and the leading men of the civil service behind them", and – a few years later – of "the motorists who control central and local administration, as well as justice".⁷⁷ Thirty years on, its writers, detecting a negative attitude towards motoring in the 1955 Road Traffic Bill, warned the government not to yield to pressure for artificial restrictions on the numbers of cars. "In this mechanical age . . . to restrict a country's motor-mindedness is to condemn it to technical backwardness." Three years later the paper was instructing Whitehall to come to terms with the role that the car was bound soon to play in British society, and to put "its vestigial prejudices against mass motoring back into social history where they belong".⁷⁸

I7

NO SIMPLE REMEDY

The 1960s

In the years between about 1958 and 1962 views about the motor car, as expressed in public policy, started to move into a new stage. Basic to the previous stage had been the assumption that car ownership could never become universal or even general. The car was widely seen as a middle-class luxury. It followed either that it simply would not be appropriate for car ownership to become universal (the view attributed by the *Economist* to middle-class civil servants) or that cars were, by definition, in conflict with the interests and the transport needs of the mass of the population.

Almost the last full-blooded expression of this latter idea is found in the Parliamentary debates, in the autumn of 1958, on the Conservative government's proposals to liberalise the use of cars at elections.

These debates perhaps conveniently symbolise the end of 'stage one'. Many resolutions had been passed at Conservative party conferences condemning the restrictions (contained in Section 88 of the Representation of the People Act, 1948), and in November 1958 the government brought in an amending Bill.¹ They argued that the restrictions were out of line with modern social conditions, unenforceable and liable to bring the law as a whole into disrespect. This roused intense, if predictable, opposition from the Labour party, whose protests that it was a gerrymandering move which could benefit only the Tories was backed up by the finding of a recent Gallup Poll that 60 per cent of car-owners voted Conservative, 19 per cent Labour, and 11 per cent Liberal. The discussions covered ground that had been well ploughed since 1925, and added nothing to earlier analyses of the situation. The government were not deterred by contested divisions at every stage, nor by threats such as Richard Crossman's: "We shall see that the electors know the type of people they have in government, dirty little cardsharps. They are the people who are shoving the Bill through against their own

consciences.”² The Bill was pushed through, and became law shortly before Christmas.

The background to the gradual change in policy towards the motor car (and one justification for removing the electoral restrictions) was the enormous rise in the number of cars on the road. Between 1958 and 1963 the real price of cars fell by some 18 per cent. Their number rose from under 4 million in 1956, to 4½ million in 1958, and to 6½ million in 1962. When the Tories had come to power, almost exactly half the motor vehicles in the country had been cars; by 1962 the proportion was nearly two-thirds.

With this increase had come a rise in road casualties. After being more or less stable for three years, they rose perceptibly in 1958 and to a new plateau the following year. The 1956 Act had done little to control driving behaviour. Motoring offences rose from 540,000 in 1957 to 990,000 in 1962. The government had continued to encourage the courts to make use of their powers. In 1955, even before the Bill had become law, the Home Secretary was telling the Magistrates' Association that “some courts . . . should consider whether their practice is appropriate when judged by present-day standards and in the light of current conditions”.³ A year later the Lord Chancellor was addressing the same audience in identical terms, and the Home Office sent a circular to justices' clerks drawing their attention to the increased penalties provided in the Act.⁴ In 1960 Sir Patrick Devlin told the magistrates that motoring offenders should be regarded not as either careless or dangerous, but as either errant or wicked.⁵

But these and other exhortations had little effect. Although the creation of “causing death by dangerous driving” had been followed by a noticeable rise in the number of convictions of drivers who had caused deaths, the percentage of acquittals in jury trials was still abnormally high. Average penalties were still far below the maxima; in 1959, the maximum penalty was imposed in only four out of over 7,000 convictions for dangerous driving, and in only 75 out of over 55,000 for careless driving.⁶ The average fine imposed in careless driving cases (where the maximum, even for a first offence, was £40) was £6. 10s. od.; for speeding (maximum for a first offence, £20), £3. 4s. od. Some acceptance of the idea that the whole road accident problem was in fact a complex of separate problems with which only government could deal competently is perhaps suggested by the ending in 1958 of official attempts to

allocate the blame for road accidents among the road-users involved.⁷

But offences and casualties were, by now, only part of the motor problem. The other, for some time now recognised in principle but dealt with as a practical problem only in London, was the effect of the sheer volume of traffic, above all in towns. In the 1950s, the volume of London traffic doubled, and by 1958 London traffic speeds were the lowest ever recorded. The first sustained effort to point out what the car was doing to the community, and to argue the need for thinking again from first principles about ways of regulating it, was Colin Buchanan's book *Mixed Blessing*, published in 1958. Buchanan, then working in the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, acknowledged the thinking already done on traffic problems by architects, highway engineers and other specialists such as Alker Tripp, but – with some justification – modestly offered his book as the first “general survey . . . of the impact of the motor vehicle on our society”. He pointed out, as has been done many times since, that although the motor vehicle, and especially the car, was indeed a ‘blessing’ and a major instrument of social progress, it could no longer comfortably be accommodated within a nineteenth-century fabric. It was becoming, especially in towns, a threat to environment. Dealing with through traffic in open countryside was relatively simple, though not cheap; but dealing with traffic arrived at its urban destination raised major problems of planning. Buchanan was concerned, as he said in his conclusion,

to dispel the idea that there are easy solutions to the problems brought about by the increase of motor traffic, whose application is being held up by uninterested governments or apathetic local authorities. The problems are awkward and difficult in the extreme and there is no simple remedy such as just spending on the roads the money raised by vehicle taxation.⁸

Buchanan's argument – which he was to elaborate five years later in the report of the official Study Group led by himself – had two main themes. The first was that the car might grow to be a menace unless controlled. The traditional assumption that there was somewhere a ‘saturation point’ well short of universal household ownership of cars had led naturally to the belief that in due course the problem would solve itself; the remedies would eventually catch up with the car population. This comfortable view was reflected in the

structure and attitudes of the Ministry of Transport in the mid-1950s. Until 1959 it dealt not only with roads, railways, docks and harbours and canals but also with all the complexities of civil aviation; its Minister entered the Cabinet again only in 1957, after seventeen years outside. Symptomatically, it was headed at official level between 1947 and 1959 by a Permanent Secretary who had spent most of his career dealing with shipping matters; in the mid-1950s only three of its sixteen Under-Secretaries dealt with roads or road transport.

Secondly, Buchanan introduced the idea that the main problems raised by the cars were to be found in towns. Until now the Ministry of Transport, as a former senior official has acknowledged, had seen the motor problem mainly in terms of the car's impact on the country districts.⁹ There was, as there increasingly still is, a problem here. Growth in car ownership had been one of the reasons for the decline of local rail services. Although these had also been hit, and partly replaced, by local bus services, the country bus operators themselves had complained even before the war of competition from private cars. In 1960 the problems of the country bus were studied by the Jack Committee, which concluded that the decline in rural bus journeys was due mainly to the spread of cars, and pointed out that the ratio of cars to persons was higher in the countryside than in the towns and likely to grow faster.¹⁰

It was, of course, not new to suggest that traffic created problems in towns, and, more particularly, in London; the LHCTAC's 1951 report had been one of the very rare pieces of public forward thinking on any aspect of the motor problem. What was new was the realisation that urban traffic might create such problems that no single remedy could solve them, and that to try to adapt city centres to accommodate all the traffic which they generated would be to enter on an endless spiral which would lead to the destruction of the cities without solving the problem. In other words, parking-meters and urban motorways were not alternatives (such as might be put forward by anti-individualistic Labour and forward-looking Conservatives respectively), but complementary. This implied, if anything, even more intervention by public authorities.

This view was still far from generally accepted in the 1960s. In the 1950s it was unorthodox to the point of defeatism. These were, after all, the peak years of the Macmillan era at its most unrestrained. It is perhaps only slightly unfair to take as symbolic the rejoinder

made in 1960 by one of the younger Tory back-benchers to a Labour suggestion that urban traffic problems could be solved by banning cars from central areas. This was "absolutely ridiculous", declared Mr Wilfred Proudfoot. No government, Conservative or Labour, could solve the problem. It would be solved only when complete saturation finally brought city streets to a standstill; then private enterprise, responding to the forces of the market, would provide shops and other services in the suburbs.¹¹

Official policy still rested on trying to push more and more traffic through existing street systems. The Ministry of Transport began a campaign of replacing 30-mph with 40-mph limits wherever this seemed safe. The Minister, Watkinson, told Stirling Moss in 1959: "My whole object is to put speeds up. With modern cars and better brakes it would be crazy not to."¹² The following year the Ministry asked highway authorities to raise limits wherever appropriate so as to make them "more realistic" (an approach hotly criticised by the Pedestrians' Association).¹³ In the Ministry of Transport, a London Traffic Management Unit was set up with the main task of speeding up traffic; by 1964 it could report that although in the last few years traffic had increased, overall journey speeds had actually improved.¹⁴

More attention, ministerial and public, was given to the peculiar problems of the motor car after 1959, when the Ministry of Transport shed its responsibilities for civil aviation and acquired a new Minister, Ernest Marples, and a new Permanent Secretary, Sir James Dunnett. Marples, who had made the most of his previous spell at the Post Office – on his new appointment *The Times* commented tersely that he would be no stranger to the public¹⁵ – was to stay exactly five years at Transport, a period longer than any of his predecessors except Alfred Barnes. He made the most of this office also, and succeeded in personalising the government's struggles to accommodate and control the motor car in a way that no other Minister had done, eventually generating a campaign directed against himself under the slogan "Marples must go". He was helped in this by his inheritance from his predecessors: parking-meters were by now becoming a national phenomenon (the first provincial scheme had been authorised earlier in the year), and new legislation was on the stocks. A new Road Traffic Bill drew together and codified measures dating as far back as the Act of 1930.¹⁶ (It perpetuated, among other things, the 1930 provision which required insurance companies to reimburse hospitals for treating road acci-

dent victims – now up to a maximum of £50 for an inpatient – as well as Lord Moynihan's provision, inserted in 1934, requiring payments of 12s. 6d. to doctors or hospitals giving emergency treatment. Both were anomalies in the age of a national health service, and were to come in for some criticism in the years ahead.) The Ministry of Transport was also taking new powers for itself; in 1960 the Road Traffic and Roads Improvement Act freed the Minister from the old statutory duty to consult the London and Home Counties Traffic Advisory Committee before announcing new traffic schemes or authorising local authorities to bring in meters. It also allowed him to carry out improvements on behalf of reluctant authorities and then to charge them with an appropriate share of the costs. In 1962 the Ministry of Transport cautiously suggested that "alternatives may have to be considered to prevent private cars unduly inflating peak hour traffic flows".¹⁷

Despite the appearance of activity created by these measures, they did not introduce any radically new principles. The same was true of other government measures, such as the 'pink zone' (a complex of special parking regulations introduced in central London at Christmas 1959, and one of the first actions associated with Marples), differential speed limits, 'clearways' (existing roads subject to intensive parking and waiting restrictions). These were all relatively marginal arrangements aimed at speeding traffic flow; and no compensations were offered in the still painfully slow progress on the motorway programme.

As cars increased, other restrictions followed. In 1962 another Road Traffic Act attempted to create effective sanctions against motoring offenders.¹⁸ The Act increased maximum penalties for several offences. Disqualification was made automatic for any of a list of six serious offences (unless there were special reasons for not disqualifying), and, under the 'totting-up' procedure, for a third or subsequent conviction for any of a further twenty offences. (This provision was vigorously opposed by the motoring organisations.)¹⁹ New rules began to be made for cars themselves: tests for cars over ten years old at last became compulsory, after a short voluntary period, and the Ministry of Transport began talks with the SMMT about the compulsory fitting of seat-belt anchorage points.²⁰

At the same time, the first tentative steps were taken towards trying to deal more comprehensively with the whole problem. Treasury officials in the early 1960s, acknowledging that the motor

age had arrived, began to try to assess the kinds of demands on national resources which the motor vehicle was likely to make, and other departments were in due course drawn into the attempts to outline a policy.²¹ At the Ministry of Transport, a study group under Colin Buchanan was set up in 1960, with the task of studying "the long-term development of roads and traffic in urban areas and their influence on the urban environment". Its work was supervised by a steering group, chaired by Sir Geoffrey Crowther and including representatives of architecture, local government and the New Town Corporations. Several official bodies had recommended that a thorough study should be made of traffic movements in London, and in 1961 the London Traffic Survey was set in hand (contracted out to private consultants since no single public authority or combination of authorities was competent for the task). Despite the protests of the motoring organisations, the Ministry of Transport continued to press local authorities to extend the use of parking-meters. The slow trend towards keeping cars out of central urban areas was emphasised by the appointment in 1962 of a committee under Dr Reuben Smeed, which in the summer of 1964 reported that the most efficient way of restraining traffic would be road-pricing.²² This would ensure that individual trips into cities would be economically priced, and that they would thus be undertaken only if they were valued at more than the costs they imposed upon the community as a whole. The Committee suggested equipping individual cars with a meter (or "black box"), to count the urban miles travelled and calculate the cost to the driver accordingly.

Introducing this report in the House of Commons, Marples went on to announce yet another committee of enquiry into the motor car: this time to advise on "future trends in the design of power-driven road vehicles, with particular reference to their use in towns". If the roads could not be wholly adapted to the car, could the car be adapted to the roads? Marples mused aloud:

Just as the towns of the future must be rebuilt to come to terms with the motor vehicle, so the motor vehicle must be designed to come to terms with those towns. For example, can't we design vehicles whose size, power and manoeuvrability make them more suitable for town use? And can't we reduce such things as noise and fumes? There are many separate aspects of design to be studied.²³

This committee was a striking exception to the normal run of recent enquiries into the motor car in that it was 'representative'. Its

limited and largely technical terms of reference made it for once safe to give the task to members of the major interests concerned; chaired by Lord Kings Norton, a distinguished engineer, it included several prominent spokesmen for the motor industry and the director-general of the AA.

But by now the terms of the argument about the car had been irrevocably shaped by the Buchanan Report.²⁴ Published in the summer of 1963, it was certainly the most far-reaching and influential survey yet published of the impact of the motor vehicle on its environment and of the ways in which it might be controlled.*

The argument of the Report was in many ways close to that of Buchanan's own book of five years before. Its starting point was the notion that traffic and towns were inseparable. Buildings would inevitably generate traffic, and the hope that the problem of urban congestion could be solved by building bypasses to divert the traffic from the buildings was thus quite misplaced. But at the same time there was clearly a limit to the amount of traffic that could be allowed into central urban areas if the amenities of urban living were to be preserved. The basic planning tool for preserving the city-dweller from the motor vehicle was to make a clear distinction between streets which were to be used for through traffic and those whose functions were mainly local.

This approach would not by itself answer the question of how to keep traffic down to a tolerable density. Here there were three interdependent variables – restraint, cost, environment. Total restraint – i.e. to prohibit the use of cars in towns – would be absurd, since the motor vehicle provided by far the most convenient means of access to buildings. Total freedom of access would be impossible, since without massive road improvements it would lead to the kind of chaos and destruction of environment that was already taking place; in any case, the road improvements needed would be prohibitively expensive, just as destructive of environment and in the end inadequate. How to strike a balance between restraining cars (probably by road-pricing), investing in roads and preserving environment would be up to the community to decide.

This was far from an anti-motor tract; on the contrary, it aimed at

* By June 1969, 23,500 copies of the Report had been issued, and an abridged version had been published in paperback. The translation rights had been sold for German, French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese and Finnish editions.²⁵

maximising the pleasures both of a civilised urban environment and of motor vehicles (and has been criticised for assuming that private transport was inevitable).²⁶ The Crowther steering group, in their covering report, were if anything even less disposed to repress the car. They felt that road-pricing would not deal with the problem, and that severe limitation of traffic was in any case not politically practicable. Having described the idea of restricting the access of cars to city centres as 'distasteful', they expressed the classic free-market conception of the demand for and supply of road space, translated into political terms:

Before very long, a majority of the electors in the country will be car-owners. What is more, it is reasonable to suppose that they will be very conscious of their interests as car-owners. It does not need any gift of prophecy to foresee that the governments of the future will be increasingly preoccupied with the wishes of the car-owners.²⁷

The Conservative government, like the motoring organisations, publicly welcomed the Buchanan Report in principle, but they were careful not to commit themselves to any detailed course of action. In a notably unspecific speech in the first debate on the report in February 1964, Marples allowed himself a general declaration that one-man, one-car commuting would have to be stopped. He argued that this was now politically practicable, quoting the findings of a recent Gallup Poll which showed 86 per cent of drivers agreeing that some limitations on the use of cars in the larger cities would be necessary in future, and 80 per cent prepared to accept some limitations if this lessened congestion and if they could use their cars to full advantage at other times. But he went on to insist that it was up to individual urban authorities to work out their own methods of controlling the car (a point emphasised again by the Minister of Housing and Local Government, in winding up the debate).²⁸

Opening for the Opposition in the same debate, Strauss gave no hint that there could be any differences of principle between the parties. Nobody, he said, wanted to or indeed could prevent a "staggering number" of new cars from coming on to the roads; to try to do so would seriously damage the national economy, to which the motor industry was central. He suggested that the answer lay more in the commonsense and self-restraint of motorists, and welcomed what he saw as "a less restricted and narrow view of their responsibilities, and a more public-spirited one" on the part of the

motoring organisations. He wondered whether their representatives could sit on local bodies set up by the government to consider how to secure the voluntary co-operation of car-owners.

It was left to a handful of individual Labour back-benchers to propose a more positive approach. Wedgwood Benn, after an emotional reference to "the most hideous lobby of all – the motorists' lobby", suggested that the car had made obsolete the *laissez-faire* approach, and criticised the structure of motor taxation as in no way discouraging the use of cars in towns. W. T. Rodgers pointed out that the theme of Buchanan's report was clearly stated in his book, published five years before, and asked why the government had not acted on it earlier. Only one speaker, Richard Marsh (a future Minister of Transport), suggested that there was room for serious argument between the parties about how to plan for the motor car and how to integrate it with public transport. He added that there were obstacles to action here: "The political power of the motorist is very real. I am doubtful about how far these revolutionary moves will be made against the motorist."

By the time the Conservatives left office in 1964 the kind of "revolutionary moves" implied in documents such as the Buchanan and Smeed Reports were, if not acceptable in practice, at least familiar in principle. With Labour in power, and Mr Tom Fraser at the Ministry of Transport, there were few immediate changes. The tentative search for possible solutions to the motor problem continued; in 1965 another committee of enquiry was set up, with the task of reviewing all possible methods of limiting traffic in towns – especially any which it might be possible to introduce in the next few years.²⁹ Official awareness of the problems which Buchanan had pointed out was institutionalised when in October 1965 an 'Urban Unit' was set up in the Ministry of Transport as a permanent body responsible for thinking about traffic in towns. After the premature death of its first head, its second was an official transferred from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, who thus (like Buchanan himself) brought some experience of environmental planning to bear on traffic matters. But the Labour government did have a distinctive policy towards other parts of the transport system, especially road haulage, and public awareness of this was heightened by the replacement in December 1965 of Mr Fraser by Mrs Barbara Castle. Although in general the Labour government's policies towards the car were fairly consistent developments of the policies

of the previous five years, Mrs Castle, like Marples, personalised them. She became strongly identified with measures such as the 70-mph speed limit (the first *general* limit since 1930) which had been introduced experimentally by Fraser in December 1965, and which was several times extended before finally being made permanent.

The 70-mph limit became an effective symbolic issue between government and motorists. It was opposed not only by the organisations, in the terms in which they had opposed all limits since 1896, but also by the SMMT – which argued that it would discourage the development of high-performance cars and research into more sophisticated braking and suspension systems³⁰ – and in due course by the Conservative transport spokesmen in Parliament. Also conveniently symbolic was Mrs Castle's own inability to drive a car; like Oliver Stanley, she was widely attacked as an unsuitable appointment to Transport on this score.

These factors helped to sharpen the opposition to the new Road Safety Bill which she introduced in 1966.³¹ This proposed, as well as creating a new offence of driving with a blood-alcohol level above a specified minimum, to give the police powers to make 'random checks' on motorists to test their sobriety. This latter provision ran into so many protests from the organisations and others (including the Law Society) that when the Bill was reintroduced after the General Election of March 1966 it had been considerably toned down to allow the police only to carry out tests on drivers suspected of having committed a moving traffic offence or of having been involved in an accident.³² In this form it passed into law in 1967.

Other restrictions were imposed on the private motorist. From July 1966, cars over four years old had to be tested annually, from April 1967 cars over three years. Seat-belts had to be fitted in all cars built after 1967. At the same time, the government continued to invest heavily in persuasion. A 1967 White Paper, *Road Safety – a Fresh Approach*, promised selective road improvements, a more 'scientific' approach to the analysis and cure of dangers on the roads, further attention to vehicle safety, and an extended propaganda campaign (to cost £3 million over three years from 1968, and based on the general slogan "You know it makes sense").³³ The search for common ground continued. In 1968 the Ministry of Transport published a 55-page 'green paper' on the future of speed limits.³⁴ This set out the history of speed limits, the arguments and

evidence for and against them, and ended with a list of proposals intended to stimulate discussion and comments.

These safety measures obviously affected the private car, although except for the 70-mph limit they were not aimed specifically at it. Like road safety policy throughout its history, they did not embody any distinctive political attitudes towards the private car. The nearest that the Labour government came to expressing in policy a distinctive view about the car was in their proposals for transport in general. These attempted, for the first time, to integrate the car and other forms of transport. Most previous public discussion of roads and traffic, including the Crowther and Buchanan Reports, had, at least by implication, suggested that the crux of the 'motor problem' was the need to regulate the use of cars so that the less valuable uses of cars should not obstruct the more valuable. (In other words, the simplest way to maximise the public welfare in the motor age was to maximise the marginal utility of individual trips by car.) The Labour government's white papers on transport policy³⁵ insisted that the public welfare could never be maximised by the car alone.

Mrs Castle, presenting these proposals, was at pains to emphasise that they were not anti-motorist in spirit. On the contrary, their object was to help Britain to come to terms with the motor age.³⁶ The white paper *Public Transport and Traffic*, published in December 1967, insisted that to depend only on private transport would never be possible. It was not merely that the unlimited use of private cars was unacceptable, but that there would always remain "a large number" of people who would not have the use of cars.* This was perhaps the first official recognition of an obvious fact which most previous forecasts, official or not, of the motor age had passed over, and which had been deliberately suppressed in the claims of the motoring organisations that "we are all motorists now" and in the protests of the manufacturers that the national economy would come to a standstill unless we soon were. But the existence of even a large number of non-motorists may not guarantee profits for public transport, especially on Sundays and at other non-peak times. The government therefore proposed to provide for non-motorists partly by allowing the Exchequer to subsidise unprofitable bus services.

* The GLC calculated that even in 1981 over 30 per cent of London households would not have the use of a car, and would thus need to rely on public transport.³⁷ Common sense must also suggest that even car-owners must sometime travel by other means.

Local authorities drawing up traffic plans were to balance the needs not simply of pedestrians against motor vehicles, but of passengers in buses against those in cars. The requirement that meter revenue was to be used for providing off-street car parks was to be repealed. (It was suggested that the revenue might also be used for general road improvements or for providing public transport.) All these provisions were included in the government's Transport Bill and, despite protests from the motoring organisations about the 'raid on the meter fund', duly passed into law.³⁸

The motoring organisations' protests about losing the meter revenue were the more bitter because of their continued failure to persuade the government to go back to the principles of the old Road Fund and to spend motor-tax revenue only on the roads. The arrangement proposed to the Royal Commission on Motor Cars in 1905, and built into the agreement between Lloyd George and the motoring organisations in 1908-9, had been dead since the 1930s. But it remained very much alive as part of the political currency, and demands for its return had never ceased to be part of the stock-in-trade of motoring organisations, motoring journalists and saloon-bar critics of the roads programme. The British Roads Federation pressed for a self-financing national Roads Board, and the demands for something of the kind became more insistent as the possibility grew that the government might impose a congestion tax on roads. In 1966 the government seemed to give some encouragement to the idea when Mrs Castle said that the government could not flatly turn it down unless they had something better to put in its place.³⁹

Perhaps encouraged by this, the BRF set up a special working party under the director-general of the AA. The result of this, in the autumn of 1968, was a report containing the most sophisticated proposals yet made on the subject. *Roads - a New Approach* proposed the setting-up of a National Roads Authority, to provide and maintain trunk and principal roads; it was to be financed by the whole of the revenue from vehicle licences and about a shilling of the duty on each gallon of petrol (the rest of which was to go as general revenue to the Exchequer).⁴⁰ Six months later the Minister of Transport - by then Mr Richard Marsh - rejected the proposals, arguing predictably that it would be possible to increase spending on roads only by cutting back on other programmes, and that to create an authority to deal solely with roads would isolate roads from the rest of the transport system.⁴¹ He might have added that such

arrangements would, as Treasury officials had found to their exasperation in the 1920s, interfere with the freedom of governments faced with an economic crisis to juggle with roads spending. Cuts had been made in the roads programme in the summer of 1965 and again in January 1968. (Despite this, expenditure on roads between 1961 and 1968 had grown by an annual average of 11 per cent.)

In all these activities the road-users had the support of the car-makers. The SMMT was a leading supporter of the BRF, and individual manufacturers from time to time continued to complain that failure to build enough roads would stifle the motor industry. In fact at least until the end of the 1960s it is difficult to detect any relationship between congestion and falling sales; fluctuations in home car sales seem to have been more the result of the government's economic and financial policies. The changes in the industry's fortunes were only one of the factors which kept it during these years almost continuously in the public eye; it was distinguished also by mergers and take-overs, chaotic labour relations and of course by the intrinsic nature of its product. Governments struggling with problems of the balance of payments continued to rely heavily, as they had done since the 1940s, on the industry's export performance, and did what they could, in the free-trade style of the era, to encourage this. The industry continued to insist that it could keep costs low enough for successful and profitable exporting only if it were allowed to sell enough cars at home. This it could do only if the government would stop manipulating demand for cars. But governments could not afford to make such a bargain. Paradoxically, it was precisely the economic significance of the industry which made governments unable to leave it alone; the temptation to use it as a direct instrument of economic policy was irresistible. The result was an apparently endless sequence of bewildering variations in taxation policy, especially hire-purchase restrictions.

The industry, and the Opposition of the day, would regularly demand that the government should acknowledge the industry's role in the economy by at least following consistent policies towards it. In 1960 Harold Wilson criticised the Macmillan government for having twice plunged the industry into depression by making it "the whipping boy of their economic policy".⁴² Shortly before Labour came to power in 1964, a firm of City brokers outlined the prospects for the industry as they saw them, emphasising that their optimistic

projections rested on the assumption that a future Labour government would

be aware of the fact that the motor is no longer only a plaything of the idle rich but . . . a highly treasured possession of the sort of families who are apt to be marginal voters. The economy is geared to the motor car and no government . . . can afford to disturb the growth of the motor industry very much.⁴³

But, despite Wilson's 1960 views, this assumption was a false one. During the almost continuous economic crisis after Labour took office, the motor industry was one of the foremost targets of the government's economic policy. By April 1969 there had been three increases in purchase tax, two increases in road tax, and no less than eight changes in hire-purchase regulations. There were also six separate increases in petrol tax.

Another consequence of the industry's economic importance was the determination of the Conservative government, as part of their local employment policy, to persuade motor firms to expand elsewhere than the Midlands and South-East. The Board of Trade, with its Permanent Secretary, Sir Frank Lee, taking an active part, cajoled Ford to set up on Merseyside, Rootes (who had wanted to go to Dunstable) in Scotland. (Rootes' Linwood factory, completed in 1962, has never yet produced at full capacity.) Commenting on these moves, the *Economist* speculated that the government was now so closely involved with the industry's production policy that they might be less eager to restrict demand for cars.⁴⁴ But there were no signs that the government felt that any responsibility they might have for the industry obliged them to actively help the industry to sell cars. Later governments have been no readier to help, and the sterile debates – between government, industry, Opposition and outside commentators – have gone on much as before. The deflationary measures of July 1966 helped bring the year's total of new registrations below the 1965 level. The government was reported as delighted at this.⁴⁵ Speaking before the Motor Show in October, Sir Patrick Hennessy blamed the government for the "chaos" in the industry resulting from their policies. He noted that this was the fifth such crisis in twenty years. This rider did not deter Mr Heath, the following day, from making a biting attack on the government's treatment of the industry.⁴⁶ The next spring *The Times* was declaring, in words which by now had become an empty formula:

"... Too many factors depend on [the motor industry] ... for any government to ignore its general health or neglect to provide the conditions in which it can thrive."⁴⁷

The industry did not thrive in 1967 (although, as always, its own labour troubles were partly to blame). Production and exports were both lower even than in 1966. Both rose again in 1968, although still not to the levels they had reached in 1964. In the autumn of 1969 *The Times* could describe the industry as "limping forlornly ... feeling more than usually sorry for itself".⁴⁸ At least until 1969, whatever the long-term effects of government intervention in the industry, the state of the economic art had seemed to leave governments no alternative. They wanted to build up a large and prosperous motor industry. As official intervention in the 1967 Chrysler/Rootes takeover and the 1968 British Motor Holdings/Leyland merger showed,* they were prepared to use public money directly to help achieve this. But in moments of crisis neither official affection for the industry, nor any feeling of responsibility for its structure, could exempt it from crisis measures. The industry was one of the most obvious, because one of the largest, targets.

At the end of 1969 the industry were driven to make their most elaborate appeal yet. The Economic Development Council for the motor industry published a report on the industry's prospects for the early 1970s in which they insisted that the industry could (and implicitly would) keep up exports only if the prospect of a buoyant and expanding home market gave it the confidence to keep up investment; that this called for a promise from government to stop picking on the industry in attempts at demand management; and that government and industry should reach a mutual understanding to this effect.⁴⁹

This proposal was in direct line of descent from the industry's 1940 request for increased steel supplies for home production, their 1944 demand for government encouragement of motoring, the National Advisory Council report of 1947, and a host of less formal suggestions. (The Economic Development Council, like the National Advisory Council, consisted of prominent spokesmen for the industry, leavened with civil servants.) It was applauded by

* The Industrial Reorganisation Corporation were directed to take up a share in the Chrysler equity, apparently as a safeguard against complete American domination. They supported the creation of British Leyland with a £25-million loan.

commentators in the business press, as their predecessors had applauded the industry's complaints about the horsepower tax before the war.⁵⁰ But like all the other such proposals, it was coolly received by the government. The Conservative opposition put down a resolution in the House of Commons, deploring the government's treatment of the industry. The debate on this followed the by now familiar script.⁵¹ The Opposition demanded that the government cease to use the industry as an instrument of economic policy, that it should be unshackled and allowed to play its full part in the balance of payments and in satisfying the Englishman's legitimate desire for a car. The government replied with protestations of their love and admiration for the industry, coupled with regrets that the economic situation prevented them from fully realising these sentiments.

The Minister of Technology added that the EDC's proposal was quite impracticable. No government could renounce the use of hire-purchase and other short-run controls, and no government could "underwrite particular levels of production in particular industries". He could promise only to take the industry's grievances seriously, while hoping that things would improve. This was familiar enough, and the listener's impression of *déjà vu* was only heightened when, later in the debate, Mr Geoffrey Lloyd spoke of the demand for cars in thousands of homes, while Mr Maurice Edelman reminded the House of Sir Stafford Cripps' efforts to force a reluctant industry – as always, pursuing "a policy of unenlightened self-interest" – into export markets.

Virtually the only problem created by the motor car which in these years did not grow in dimensions was road casualties. In the thirty years from 1938 they had increased by only 50 per cent, although the number of vehicles had tripled; the accident record for 1968 was better than for any year since 1962. But the 1960s ended with fierce arguments in progress on several other fronts. There was growing concern at the working and the effectiveness of the law against drunken driving. Police enforcement of the breath-test provisions in the 1967 Act had some rough handling in the courts; defence lawyers discovered many gaps in the law, and the Lord Chief Justice observed that "this Act gives untold trouble to magistrates and juries all over the country. Every week brings a new point and they go on and on."⁵² The general interest in 'environment' generated increasingly articulate opposition to the noise, smell and general presence of motor vehicles. Attempts to put a money value

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on loss of amenity gave some extra edge to this kind of opposition. It was epitomised in the arguments over the GLC's proposals for a system of urban motorways in London; the GLC, backed by the BRF, was locked in battle with a large number of vocal and well-informed critics, some of whom commissioned and produced a book attacking the scheme – which they saw as simply providing, at colossal expense, for a large number of marginal motor-car trips.⁵³ Never had it been more clear that the car was at the centre of some of the major political problems of the age.

I8

MOTORISTS AND OTHERS

The interested parties in the 1960s

It is one of the central themes of this study that changes in attitudes, private and public, towards the car have lagged behind changes in the place of the car in society and in the ways it is used. The motoring organisations have tried, with some support, to keep alive an increasingly anachronistic notion of what motoring should be like. Governments have given only an uncertain lead in bringing this view up to date. This may be the moment to come back to one of the questions with which I began: how far is governmental reluctance to deal with the car, in the sense of deliberately controlling its impact on the community, the consequence of successful pressure by a 'motor lobby'? It is often suggested that the economic importance of the motor industry gives it and the other motor interests the power to prevent governments doing things of which they disapprove, particularly in areas such as safety or amenity. Stephen Black, who in a closely argued book suggested dealing with accidents through improvements in car design based on ergonomics and cybernetics, wrote that the production of an ergonomic car was "very much a matter of faith and politics". He suggested that the motor manufacturers' preoccupation with profits blinded them to the importance of safety, that the Ministry of Transport appeared simply to do their bidding, and that without some radical change in this relationship the only solution would be "tight government control or full-scale nationalisation of the industry".¹ Similar analyses are often offered of government failure to impose stricter speed limits or to keep cars out of city centres.

But before discussing the existence, let alone the influence, of a motor lobby, one must identify its component parts. Over the years, the interests on both sides of the fence have changed. By 1970 some once actively opposed to the car had virtually disappeared – the most obvious being all those concerned with the horse. Another once cohesive and generally hostile interest, which had overlapped

with these, had more or less dissolved into its component parts. This was the 'rural' interest, which before 1914 united country rate-payers, roadside property-owners, the breeders and users of horses, and often the country magistrates who spoke for all the others. The indignation of the ratepayers had melted before the several developments of the original Road Board, roads classification after 1920, the increase in central responsibility for both financing and managing major roads even in country districts. Property values had in general been improved by road development.* Country JPs were now at least as likely to be motorists themselves as were urban ones; both were conspicuously lenient towards drivers in the dock.

Among other road-users, the decline of the horse and of the railways made the commercial vehicle-users far more significant, economically, socially and politically, than they were before the war; threatened with (and sometimes subjected to) various forms of public control by the Labour party, they continued the process of organisation which they began in opposition to the railways. Buses continued to suffer from competition from the private car and from the congestion which it caused. At the same time, the spread of public ownership had altered their status as an interest, as well as freeing them from some commercial restraints.

Bicycling had declined: pedal cycles were estimated to have covered 6.7 thousand million miles in 1961, 4.1 in 1965. The membership of the cycling clubs had also fallen (for instance, the Cyclists' Touring Club from 40,000 members before the war to 20,000 in 1969). But the clubs have always represented such a tiny fraction of the cycling population that these figures should not in themselves be treated as an index of political influence. In 1970 the Pedestrians' Association was still in being; many of its original objectives were now being supported by amenity societies and other 'consumer' organisations.

About 'public opinion' at large it is hard to generalise. It has necessarily always reflected two things: the proportion of the public who are not motorists, and the propensity to think 'like motorists' of those who are. By the end of the 1960s, with probably 25 million people belonging to car-owning families, any random sample would be likely to contain a large proportion of 'motorists'. There

* Although the extraordinary delays in agreeing the route of the M.4 showed that the landed interests could still effectively obstruct specific proposals.²

is no empirical evidence of how far these people's relationships with cars affected their thoughts or actions, but certainly some of them, when asked for their views, often showed themselves rather more objective than the motoring organisations might have wished.* Magistrates and juries may perhaps not constitute a random sample of the public; but in the 1960s, as in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, they conspicuously failed to express any marked disapproval of people who committed motoring offences.

Confronting these different groups, and faced with the task of devising policies which could reconcile both their and the national interests, were the government departments concerned with the car. In the early 1900s the motor-car problem was handled by the LGB and the Home Office; and the Home Office would have liked to take it entirely upon themselves. In the 1960s the motor vehicle, in one way or another, was the concern of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, the Home Office, the Ministry of Transport, the Treasury, the Ministry of Technology, the Board of Trade, the Department of Social Security – and, within those departments, of not one but several different divisions. By 1969, ten of the Ministry of Transport's under-secretaries were dealing with various aspects of roads and road transport.

With this specialisation within the executive came greater expertise.† Transport was among the pioneers in Whitehall in closely associating 'professionals' (i.e. technical experts) with general administrators in policy-making.³ Expertise was also fostered through research, in units such as the economic planning side of the Ministry of Transport and the Road Research Laboratory. The change in the status and activities of the RRL is symptomatic. Before 1939 it was controlled by the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, and concerned itself mainly with technical aspects of road construction. By the late 1960s it had been taken over by the Ministry of Transport and was looking at traffic control, accident prevention, vehicle design, the behaviour of road-users, the

* See p. 373.

† There had long been specialisation in another sense. It is striking to note how many years were spent in the same department by some of the officials mentioned in this study. Piggott was in Transport for 15 unbroken years, Hurcomb for 18 (with a further six during the second war), Birtchnell for 33. Grigg spent 17 consecutive years in the Treasury, Niemeyer 21, Hamilton 23 in the Treasury and the revenue departments.

planning and building of roads, and the co-ordination of roads with other means of transport.

Co-operation between departments increased, although not as fast as many critics would have liked. In the traffic and planning field Transport and Housing worked together in joint study groups and on individual projects, but without any central co-ordinating machinery. The appointment in 1969 of Mr Anthony Crosland as Secretary of State responsible for both departments made no immediate difference to this situation.

One area which Edwardian administrators would have found, by contrast, comfortably familiar was that of local government. All the problems of striking the right balance between central control and local option, which had so confused the early days of the 10-mph local speed limit after 1903, remained alive in the 1960s. There were still 823 separate highway authorities, 382 traffic authorities, 1,190 parking authorities, and 7,054 parish cycle and motor-cycle parking authorities.⁴ Many of these small units were incapable of anticipating the problems that the car was about to create for them. Of boroughs replying to a BRF survey in 1961, only 60 per cent had given any thought at all to a parking policy, and of these less than half had started to prepare a plan.⁵ Seen from the perspective of London, this may have seemed almost incredible improvidence, but it partly reflected the fact that car ownership, still closely linked to income levels, varied greatly between different parts of the country; although by 1966 there were 3.8 people per car in Surrey, the figure for Glasgow and Coatbridge was 11.2.⁶

The failure of local authorities to plan adequately for the car was related also to another of the problems caused by the car. It was by now clear that these were almost by definition of a kind with which the ramshackle structure of local government could not deal; once self-evident divisions between communities, and especially between town and country, blurred as the spread of cars allowed more people to extend the pattern of their lives over areas anything up to sixty miles in diameter. An administrative structure based on the essential separateness of local communities ceased to make sense. Just as the mobility of the earliest cars had raised fundamental problems about local government finance and thus in turn about local-central relationships, by mid-century the car had helped to undermine the basis of the whole structure of local government. The Ministry of

Transport explained how this in turn affected transport to the Royal Commission which was set up in the mid-1960s to consider the problem:

We are now living in a 'motor age'. . . . Yet the structure of local government is still the one established in the 19th century when the only transport problems were those of a 'steam railway and horse bus' age. . . . The transport system [must] be developed as an integral part of the country's economic and social development. Such integration of policy implies the need for local authorities to . . . comprehend in their planning and programming as much as possible of the territory in which interrelated traffic movements take place. . . .

They went on to suggest that not only road-building, but traffic regulation and the promotion of road safety, needed skills and specialist staff which the smaller authorities could not support (a line of argument borne out by the findings of the BRF parking survey).⁷

These and other changes greatly affected the position of the motorists' formal spokesmen, the motoring organisations. They have been faced with the need to adapt not only to changes in the world around them, but also to internal pressures. Some of the problems with which they had to deal in the 1960s had been unchanged since the early 1900s. But the growth of government intervention created new ones, while the growth in the size of the organisations paradoxically made it much harder for them to take effective action.

By the end of the 1960s the AA had 4 million members,* the RAC over 1½ million. Both retained distinctive traces of their old style. The RAC was still in form a private club; it published no accounts, and most of its 'members' were still – as they had been since 1908 – associate members, who played no part in electing club officials. In 1969 it was chaired by Mr Wilfrid Andrews, who had held this office since 1945. The AA modernised its management structure in 1964, at the top replacing the two Joint Secretaries with a Director-General, himself a former director of Shell-Mex and BP. But the Duke of Edinburgh was succeeded as its President by the Duke of Norfolk, while the governing committee remained determinedly responsible to no outside body; new committee members were elected by existing members (the vote requiring a

* Since the early 1920s its membership had been equivalent to between 40 and 50 per cent of the car population.

three-to-one majority). The annual general meeting was held on a summer weekday morning in the Savoy Hotel, London. Critics of these arrangements alleged that the AA management frustrated at least one attempt to challenge them from the floor by packing the meeting with members of the AA permanent staff.⁸

Both organisations were still active politically, co-ordinating where possible through their Standing Joint Committee. The AA supported the BRF, whose political tactics usually involved studiously moderate public argument, often backed by impressive factual research (some of it sponsored in universities).^{*} The RAC continued to support only the Roads Campaign Council (founded on Mr Andrews' initiative), whose always polemical tone became increasingly shrill as, in the early 1960s, it lost the support of some of its original backers, including the BRF.

The matter of style and tone was important. In modern British politics it is a sound rule-of-thumb that there is an inverse relationship between an interest's political effectiveness and the intensity of its public protests. To protest too much may be counter-productive in that it does not impress the executive and may damagingly be taken by potential supporters as a sign that other methods have failed. In the past, the political weight of the motoring organisations had rested on two facts: that they represented and spoke for – in the sense that their managements were elected by or at the very least drawn from – a coherent and well-defined interest, and that they possessed almost unique expertise about the motor car. Even so, they had difficulties in reconciling the often conflicting views of their members, and – what was often at the centre of those conflicting views – of choosing between aggressive direct action or confidential negotiation. As early as the discussions of the Motor Car Bill in 1902–3 the Automobile Club had plumped for the second method; the recriminations after the Bill had become an Act were the penalty for failing to achieve complete success through it.

By the 1960s the very size of the organisations, despite the increase in wealth that went with this,[†] had helped to weaken their political position. The patent lack of interest shown by most of their members

^{*} Their attempts to refute the critics of the GLC motorway box scheme were a strident exception to this. The BRF (many of whose members are actively concerned in road construction) declared the critics' case to be "non-sensical, wildly impractical, ill-founded and factually inaccurate".⁹

[†] In 1969, the AA's income was over £15 million.

in the organisations' political activities made nonsense of the managements' claims to 'represent' them – the more so since the mass membership neither elected the management nor, partly because of the expense, was consulted by them on policy matters. In the late 1960s the AA Committee was frequently criticised by a few articulate members for its unrepresentative nature; the critics were not impressed by committee declarations that they could speak for members because they were in touch with thousands of them daily, and pointed out that a member asking for help with a puncture was not likely to give the patrolman his views on the Committee's attitude towards road-pricing policy. Midway between government and membership, the management had the difficult job of simultaneously persuading government to heed their views on the grounds that they spoke for a large and united (and thus politically significant) body of motorists, and of persuading members (and non-members) to take an interest in their activities on the grounds that government did heed them. This process is clearly seen in a passage from an AA annual report, in which members were told: "Because of its large membership, the AA is able to speak with authority on behalf of motorists as a whole and is regarded both by central and by local government as a powerful and responsible influence in motoring affairs."¹⁰ The fact is obvious that motorists do not all think alike. Of nearly 10,000 drivers who replied to a questionnaire printed in the *Guardian* in the summer of 1969, over half thought the driving test inadequate, two-thirds thought that drivers should be retested at intervals, three-quarters thought that physical examinations should be a significant element in the test, two-thirds admitted that running a car did not put a severe strain on their budget, and two-fifths felt that motor taxation was not too high – views a long way from those usually expressed by the organisations.¹¹

Whatever the views to be put across, a central question remains: how this should be done. As in the early 1900s there is a choice between frontal assault and infiltration. The detailed techniques of frontal assault have remained very much the same as sixty years ago. Candidates at general elections are circularised and invited to declare their support for the organisations' perennial demands (lower taxes, more roads, better parking facilities). MPs who seem sympathetic, and often others as well, are briefed to put the motoring point of view in Parliament. The private motorist's case is also usually well provided for in the campaigns of the Roads Campaign

Council and the BRF. To reassure individual members that their interests are being vigorously represented, the SJC and the RAC publish full annual reports of their political activities. The AA mentions its own, rather briefly, in its general Annual Report. In 1968-9 both the RAC and the AA launched large-scale public campaigns against levels of motor taxation and the inadequacy of the roads programme.^{12*}

Probably the main function of these public activities is in satisfying organisation members' demands for positive action. But this approach often has little effect, especially on the big issues. Worse, it may rebound and expose the organisations to equally public and damaging criticism. No good is done to the motoring cause if MPs declare, for instance – as did Mr Moyle in the 1955 discussions of the Road Traffic Bill – that its propaganda makes less sense than that of the Pedestrians' Association, or – as did Mr Strauss the following year – that its attitudes are anti-social: "They have carried on propaganda contrary not only to what we all here consider to be in the best interests of motorists and of the people of the country as a whole, but even sometimes to proposals whose value has been proved by experience in other countries."¹⁴ The 'liberal' press has often been critical of AA and RAC activities. *The Times* thought the RAC "unwise" to have protested against the Home Secretary's instructions to chief constables on how to conduct breath tests under the 1967 Act.¹⁵ The *Guardian* often editorially criticised what it saw as concessions made to motorists in legislation; and its planning correspondent scathingly denounced the AA's 1969 campaign for lower taxes and more roads, calling it "a dishonest bit of work" and announcing that he was returning his own card in protest against this misuse of his membership fee (a gesture which, according to the *Guardian*, aroused much support).¹⁶ It is hard to tell how seriously the organisations took this kind of criticism; one may simply note that the Executive Vice-Chairman of the RAC wrote to *The Times*, and the Director-General of the AA to the *Guardian*, to justify their attitude in each case.¹⁷

Again, all-out onslaughts on the government are worse than useless if they alienate permanent officials with whom the organisations

* One of the most elaborate of the AA's exercises in the 1960s was to conduct a group of MPs and journalists, in July 1965, to inspect the 'missing link' road which should have joined the M.1 to the M.6. The party, led by the Director-General of the AA, flew from Gatwick.¹³

have to deal, and whose help they may sometimes need (as the AA, for instance, needed the help of the Ministry of War Transport against the Ministry of Labour during the war).^{*} The weakness of Parliament makes it all the more important to keep up informal contacts with civil servants, as well as the more formal relationships through membership of departmental and other committees. It was probably the public intransigence of the organisations over parking-meters that led the Ministry of Transport to change their mind about including motoring representatives on the official working party.[†]

But these arguments do not, of course, appeal to those members of the organisations who believe that their interests are being neglected by government. Every annual meeting of the AA produces its crop of demands from the floor for uninhibited attack on the Ministry of Transport. Sections of the press join in. The *Daily Herald*, summing up what it saw as the AA's failure to protect the motorist from the parking-meter in the early 1960s, concluded that it had now become "just a business". A columnist in the *Sunday Express*, criticising the organisations' inability to defeat the 'totting-up' procedure for offences proposed in the 1962 Bill, complained: "It appears that they would rather be an annexe of the Ministry of Transport than a bastion of motoring. They would rather sit on a Marples advisory committee than fight a campaign." He went on to advise AA and RAC members to protest personally against the proposals, and also to write to their organisation threatening to resign "unless it does the job it is paid to do".¹⁸

But here is the heart of the matter. What is the 'job'? And how is it best done? In practice, the organisations have divided their efforts between public lobbying and private contacts; their membership of advisory committees gives them some claim on government's attention, and they also provide other useful services (such as sign-posting and traffic control) free of charge. The RAC has continued to act as the government's agent in controlling motor sport. But in recent years the organisations have been chided from many quarters for failing to perform other functions. The Prices and Incomes Board criticised them in 1967 for giving their members too little guidance about the efficiency of garages.¹⁹ Some members of the AA have demanded that it should act as an effective motorists' consumer association; they complained that the AA's constitution

^{*} See p. 303.

[†] See p. 340.

provided no channels for putting pressure on the committee to do this (or anything else).

At the same time, the organisations are no longer the experts they were. They have lost much of the influence once derived from their near-monopoly of specialist technical knowledge about motor vehicles. Apart from this, as long as the 'motor problem' was seen mainly as a road safety problem – as it was at least until 1939 – motorists could claim to know at least as much about the technical aspects of the subject as anybody; and on questions about regulating the behaviour of motorists their vague assertions carried no less weight than any others. Today, when the motor problem is seen partly in terms of major questions about environmental planning, the organisations simply lack the resources to offer adequate or useful answers. Even road safety has become a far more complex subject. Penology and the other behavioural sciences have re-opened all the arguments about the effectiveness of restrictions on driving and of penalties for ignoring these; declarations, for instance, that any speed limit will be "driven up to" increasingly need some kind of researched support. Thus the organisations' expertise is shared not only by other groups and by thousands of individuals for whom they do not speak, but by government itself; for instance, the creation of the Ministry of Transport's economic section is slowly helping to take the arguments about the costs of motoring beyond the crude exchange of debating points which went on throughout the 1930s. These developments have in turn led the organisations both to seek allies, and with them to finance their own research, especially through the BRF, to counter official information.

Two things follow from the unrepresentative character of the organisations' managements: they do not control votes and, in a democracy, can be presented as faintly disreputable. For all these reasons governments, while usually continuing to seek the organisations' participation and advice (and glad to claim their support when given), have been able totally to ignore them when necessary. This has made for an ambivalent relationship, in which continued private co-operation has been overlaid by public bickering. Mrs Barbara Castle's régime at Transport was subjected to vigorous and often extravagant attacks by the organisations, reaching by early 1967 what one moderate motoring correspondent described as a state of "almost total war".²⁰ Mrs Castle herself in an interview felt confident enough to brush aside the organisations' criticisms

with the comment that their managements were not democratically elected and that their predictable reactions had no effect on the public at large.²¹ The statement may have been unusually frank, but the sentiment was not, for the government side, atypical; a former senior official at Transport has declared that, from the purely political point of view, it would make little difference if the organisations ceased to exist.²²

This view would not, of course, be shared by other groups such as the pedestrians or the cyclists. The motorists' arguments with them since the war have echoed all the conflicts of the 1930s and earlier. Both the cycling and the pedestrians' organisations are, if anything, less representative of the interests for which they claim to speak than the AA or RAC, never including more than a fraction of them in their small memberships. Despite this, the cyclists for long managed to exercise a veto over legislation affecting them; and although post-war governments did nerve themselves at last to require bicycles to carry lights (and later reflectors as well), the cyclists as late as 1968, complaining that they had not been adequately consulted over a relevant section of the revised Highway Code, were able to extract a private and a public apology from the Ministry of Transport.²³ Pedestrians were no less extreme in their views than the cyclists (they were seriously proposing a 50-mph speed limit and limitations on the power of cars in 1967).²⁴

One former Minister of Transport, looking back on his period of office in the 1950s, has commented that both cyclists and pedestrians were politically more significant than the motoring organisations.²⁵ Examples could be offered to suggest that this is putting it rather strongly: the care taken by the Ministry of Transport to consult the motorists about parking-meter policy, or the fluctuations of official policy on vehicle-testing. There is very little evidence that the Pedestrians' Association on their own have been able significantly to influence many policy decisions. Their views have always attracted considerable support from uncommitted liberal observers, for instance in the 'quality' press. This gives at least the illusion of influence, but it can be a long way from the reality.

The part played by the police in enforcing motor legislation has obviously always been crucial, and from the earliest days police views – especially those of the Metropolitan Police – have been taken seriously by the policy-makers. Because of this, they have always

been consulted when policy has been actually in the making. But their often strong opinions have equally often had little effect. In the 1920s above all, the police had resented both having to enforce unpopular laws which involved them in frequent arguments with motorists, and the failure of the courts to back them up. The gibe had been familiar since the earliest days of motoring that while the police hounded innocent motorists, dangerous criminals were left to go about their business unmolested. The police have long been anxious to put an end to this situation: they argued before the Royal Commission of 1929 (and the Home Office did not dissent) that traffic management should be taken away from them and given to a new body of 'traffic wardens' or the motoring organisations.²⁶ Thirty years later, when dealing with traffic matters was taking about 14 per cent of police time, the Police Federation told the Royal Commission on the Police that motorists had fair grounds for complaining about the wide variations in police practice from area to area, and suggested that a public relations body be set up to co-operate with the AA, the RAC, the BRF and other organisations. (The chief constables, on the other hand, told the Commission that enforcing traffic laws neither distracted the police from their other jobs nor – given the benefits of successful enforcement – was a waste of time).²⁷ Various witnesses again proposed that there should be a separate force of traffic police. The Commission declared that this was misconceived; it would be wasteful to divide up the police force.²⁸ A few years later the Estimates Committee returned to the subject, suggesting that more traffic duties should be given to wardens (as has since started to be done).²⁹

Police dislike enforcing road safety partly because of their discomfort at having to deal with offenders who so often will not "come quietly"; the embarrassed Chief Constable of Huntingdonshire in 1902 was only one of the first in a long line of policemen trying to deal with middle-class lawbreakers not willing to admit that they had broken the law. (Recent research suggests that most petty traffic violators are of higher white-collar status.)³⁰ Nearly a third of a sample surveyed for the AA in 1965 strongly supported, and another quarter agreed with, the proposition that "the motorist is pushed around all the time".³¹ A survey in 1969 showed that over 50 per cent of motorists felt that the police spent too much time catching motoring offenders – and that over 40 per cent of non-drivers agreed with them.³² A police witness told the Royal Commission

that enforcement of traffic laws created resentment among motorists, who were often people of "educational and social superiority"; he added that "a vast new class of offenders has been created in a class of the community which was formerly law-abiding"³³ (which, by the 1960s, was hardly an original piece of analysis).

Many of the police share the common view that motoring offences are not crimes. This in itself makes their job of enforcing the law no easier. But even some of those who do not agree are no happier in the job, suspecting (like the Pedestrians' Association) that the more extreme motorists have infiltrated other organisations and endanger road safety by converting them to the 'motoring' point of view. Thus an anonymous article in the *Police Journal* for October 1954 complained: "A large section of the press, as well as the BBC, seem dominated by the motoring interests, and even such reputable bodies as Chambers of Commerce, the AA and RAC, pay lip service to road safety but do not hesitate to join the barrage of opposition to any regulations . . . which may affect the drivers of cars adversely."³⁴

An American writer on the enforcement of traffic laws has commented that the whole subject falls into a 'grey' area in which the police are virtually compelled to develop their own principles for action because the instructions given them by public opinion (whether directly or through legislatures) are ambiguous or inconsistent or for some other reason unenforceable.³⁵ This is equally valid as a comment on British practice. The police have been allowed a great deal of discretion. Senior police officers have tried to mitigate the effects of unpopular laws by enforcing them as flexibly as possible, wanting neither to make themselves unpopular nor to draw the law so tightly as to create an impossibly large number of motoring offenders. (The problem is a real one; of the 10,000 motorists who replied to the 1969 *Guardian* questionnaire – of whom half had incomes of over £2,000 per year – 55 per cent admitted that they did not always observe the traffic laws.)³⁶ The Metropolitan Police had turned a blind eye to many speed limit offences in the late 1920s. In 1956 they advised that the 30-mph speed limit should be raised, and in 1959 announced some relaxation in law-enforcement with the aim of removing "factors tending to inflame a sense of hostility against the police".³⁷ This approach naturally has its critics. The Pedestrians' Associations cited the 1959 announcement as evidence of "a lack of urgency" in police enforce-

ment of traffic law.³⁸ Not every policeman has appreciated it; a retiring County Superintendent wrote in 1957:

Almost all senior police officers are 'broad-minded'. In preaching to their underlings the gospel of friendly co-operation with the public they have managed to produce such a panic-stricken paralysis in relation to traffic offences as to leave motorists, however reckless of the law, virtually unmolested. . . . Motorists have formed themselves into organisations which are protective in character to the point where deliberate attempts are made to frustrate the efforts of the police to enforce the law. . . .³⁹

Motorists for their part have generally welcomed 'broad-mindedness'. A survey carried out on behalf of the Royal Commission on the Police concluded that two groups in the community could be said to feel some resentment towards the police: the young, and motorists. The organisations' SJC somewhat patronisingly told the Commission: "Motorists generally may be expected to obey the law if it is reasonable and precise, and is not only capable of enforcement, but seems to be uniformly and fairly enforced."⁴⁰ (This statement drew from the chairman of the Pedestrians' Association, Professor Goodhart, the comment that it was no wonder the crime rate continued to rise, when "an influential and prosperous body of people think they need obey the law only if they think it is reasonable".⁴¹) But 'broad-mindedness', or 'flexibility', makes for the opposite of uniform and predictable enforcement, and has been partly responsible for the differing styles of police behaviour which many observers see as a basic cause of bad relations between motorists and police. Variations in police practice towards motoring offences seem to have been as wide in the 1960s as they were in the early 1900s.* In 1962 the Royal Commission advised the police to try to formulate uniform policies. But Elliott and Street, quoting 1965 figures, could see no correlation between the strength of a local force, the number of road casualties, the overall number of prosecutions or the proportion of prosecutions for specific offences.⁴² (Exactly the same is true of the United States, where the main source of the very wide variations in police activity against motorists seems to be the policy of the local police department: "Where the norms of the department reward active ticket-writers, the police will respond with tickets."⁴³)

* These variations are sometimes muffled, sometimes exacerbated, by local variations in the sentencing practices of courts.

Governments have left much discretion to the police in enforcing road-traffic law because they have found it hard to decide precisely what objectives the law should embody. They have found it equally hard to formulate consistent or coherent policies towards the motor industry. The ambiguous official attitude towards the industry – encouragement and praise for its contribution to the economy and concern with its structure, combined with an inability to refrain from using it as an economic regulator – has helped to give a curious tone to the continuing discussions between industry and government. The government has consistently declined to do anything about the industry's main requests – for lighter taxation, or less fluctuating hire purchase policy, or a guaranteed home market. Partly for this reason some firms have been running at a very low level of output, and the industry's side of the discussion has consisted in an unrelieved lament about the impossibility of their position. Demands from some quarters for an official 'motor-car policy' which would limit the use, if not the number, of cars on the roads have been countered by the industry (and the other roads interests) with the demand that government should deliberately encourage motoring by building more roads, reducing taxation, removing needless restrictions, and so on.

This line of argument has been familiar at least since the 1920s. Since the war its weight has, if anything, increased; the motor industry's contribution to exports,* its complex involvement with almost all the other sectors of the engineering industry, the intrinsic social and thus political appeal of its products, have at the very least given it a platform of a kind shared by no other industry. The burden of its message has continued to be that its own efforts are indispensable for the country's economic survival; that ownership of its products is indispensable for full self-realisation in a modern society; and that for both reasons government should stand aside and let the flood be unleashed. In 1968 the chairman of BMC concluded a public lecture with the following peroration:

The man, and the woman, in their cars in the street, quite evidently

* Although the industry does indeed export on a large scale, some rather disingenuous use is made of the statistics. Demands for policies which will allow higher home sales of cars are often supported by reference to exports worth (in 1969) nearly £1,000 million. But this magic figure covers all the industry's products, including buses, trucks, tractors, tyres, caravans, marine engines, and spare parts for all of these. Cars themselves account for only a third of the total value.

have concluded that, if they *exist* by breathing and eating, they *live* by moving. They are the people who in the end determine where and how the motor vehicle shall be employed in society. Our task ahead is to provide the vehicles they require, and the services to keep those vehicles on the road – as simple as that. . . . So without more ado, I suggest we get on with it.⁴⁴

The industry's point of view has been widely accepted. Many commentators have echoed the words of *The Times* Motor Show Supplement in October 1969: " . . . By the middle 1970s Britain will have so cut back and restricted her motor industry that it will no longer be in a position to contribute to her balance of payments. All this for the sake of an annual 20,000 or 30,000 more cars on our roads".⁴⁵

The problem has continued to be, as it was in the 1940s, that the two sides see a conflict of interest. Governments want higher exports, but they also cannot refrain from trying to regulate the economy by manipulating home demand for cars; manufacturers have insisted that only high and guaranteed home sales can keep costs low enough to allow them to export and still make profits. The EDC proposals of January 1970 were only the most elaborate and detailed statement yet of a demand which the industry had been making for at least thirty years. By 1970, one new obstacle to any kind of bargain with government was that the British motor industry was hardly master in its own house; only one of the four major groups was wholly in British hands. British subsidiaries of American firms were not free agents, and had to tailor their policies to overall patterns devised in Detroit.*

While arguing about economic policy, government and industry have managed to co-operate in controlling to some extent the damage done by the car to amenity and to life itself. Much of the initiative has come from government. Mrs Castle once declared: "Safety in car design cannot be left to the voluntary efforts of manufacturers and it is nonsense to suggest that it ever has been."⁴⁶ Despite the motoring organisations' ritual appeals that as much as possible should be left to the free choice of the individual motorist, the fitting of seat-belts, burst-proof doors and collapsible steering columns are now required

* British Fords had exploited their status as being part of an international company, and thus free to move out of Britain if necessary, as a negotiating counter over forty years before: see p. 173, above.

by law, and standards of maintenance have been increasingly closely controlled.

Legislation does not necessarily imply coercion. The manufacturers are always consulted about changes in the law affecting the construction of vehicles; voluntary action (for instance in modifying dangerous styling features) has sometimes made legislation unnecessary. Regular tests for older cars have caused real administrative problems; as Labour spokesmen foresaw in 1955, it has been difficult to police a system almost entirely in the hands of the private garage trade. But the protests of car-users have never been politically significant, since they have not been supported by the manufacturers – who can only welcome anything which shortens the life-cycle of a car. The close relationship between the industry and the Ministry of Transport has made it possible for many questions to be settled in private negotiations, without need for public discussion in Parliament or elsewhere. (The SMMT has been known to discourage MPs from airing such questions in Parliament.) This relationship has helped to prevent the development of the kind of gap between private practice and public requirements which in the United States led to recriminations on both sides when the Federal government began to implement some of the demands generated by Ralph Nader's book *Unsafe at Any Speed*.

But this kind of relationship rests on mutual willingness to compromise, and in Britain government has undeniably been willing to make concessions. The long delays, even after the technical problems had been solved, in taking action against vehicle noise show well what happens when government is reluctant simply to impose a solution. Marples announced in March 1961 that his department had begun talks with the SMMT about the compulsory fitting of seat-belt anchorage points in all cars.⁴⁷ This was not required by law until the autumn of 1966; and post-1964 cars were not required to be fitted with actual belts until the end of 1968.

The last, but potentially among the most important of the major organised interests which might influence policy towards the car, are the political parties. It might be expected that, given the nature of party competition and the division of views about the car, the parties would have taken up distinctive stands on the subject. It is one of the most striking features of the political history of the private car that Britain should have reached the 1970s before either

party had taken up any identifiable position on most of the pressing problems which the existence of the car presents.

The political history of the car has been loud with disclaimers of partisan interest; arguments about road safety and traffic, in particular, have often rested on the assumption that personal experience is a better guide to action than the Whips. Possibly the only major issue in which the parties have ever consistently seen any political interest was the question of using cars at elections.* The debates about this, as late as 1958, tapped an extremely long-established vein of class-based attitudes to the car. There were other isolated expressions of this: Mr William Hamilton's comment in 1950 that his miner constituents were not interested in the size of the petrol ration; or the retort, provoked by a Tory interruption, from Mr Patrick Gordon Walker, opening the Labour party's comments on the 1960 Road Traffic Bill: "There are more fast cars on that side of the House than on this. . . ." ⁴⁸ But these were no substitutes for a distinctive party policy.

Occasional attempts were made to define an argument. Gordon Walker, in the same debate, moved from an encomium of the motor car as a major factor in social change ("the ownership of a car . . . is beginning to replace the ownership of a house as the expression of a man's sense of independence and self-respect") to a criticism of the Conservatives for their doctrinaire refusal to develop a co-ordinated policy for all types of transport, including the car; he then attacked them for permitting private expenditure on motor cars while refusing to increase public expenditure on roads. ⁴⁹ But this was very much a personal view; it was not developed by other speakers in the debate, nor by the Labour party subsequently. Two years later Strauss was to open the discussion of the 1961 Bill with the comment that his views were "entirely personal. . . . There is no general party agreement on these matters." ⁵⁰ Nor were there any pressures from the Conservative side to do any differently; Marples had introduced the 1960 Bill with the disarming admission: "One thing about traffic is certain. It is an empirical process. One never quite knows whether what one is doing is right or wrong." ⁵¹

Neither major party has adopted a consistent position towards the motor car. Discussions have tended to take the form of a defence

* The discussions of this subject at Labour Conferences between the wars are the only occasions on which either party has given any sustained public attention to any aspect of the car.

by the government of the day of the gradual accumulation of restrictions on the car (whether through taxation or traffic laws) in the face of demands from the Opposition, echoing the motorists' organisations and the motor industry, that they should work out a 'positive' rather than a 'negative' policy. In 1964, Mr Ray Gunter, for Labour, declared: "I hope we shall look into the future and ensure that those who own private cars – everybody has a right to a private car, if he wants it – are properly and adequately dealt with on the roads."⁵² Two years later Mr Peter Walker, for the Conservatives, said: "You must see the car as an important social development bringing much pleasure to many people, so you must pursue an active policy to cope with it, not a negative attitude."⁵³

Walker's remark, though familiar in tone, was made in the course of a series of arguments between the parties after 1966 in which they came as close as they have yet been to taking up distinctively opposed positions. The traditional Tory attempt to present Labour as ideologically opposed to wider car-ownership was reinforced by the government's efforts to fit the private car into a coherent national transport policy. After fifty years of declarations by interested parties that the public had a fundamental right to own cars, the Labour government's transport White Papers tentatively expressed the idea that there might, at the same time, exist a right not to own them – and that the taxpayer could thus be asked to finance not only roads for Sunday motorists but also buses for those who could not or did not want to drive.

This view was inevitably attacked by the Tories as a typically mean-minded Socialist alternative to some Conservative utopia in which twenty million motorists could drive their cars wherever and whenever they chose, and in which the few without the initiative to belong to a car-owning family could beg a ride or walk. Opposition hostility was sharpened by Mrs Castle's own forceful manner and her inability to drive. A former front-bench spokesman on transport policy declared that she "always seems to get into the posture of being anti-motorist. . . . Perhaps it comes from the basic sense of envy which seems to inspire most socialist thought. Because she does not drive a car herself, she does not see why other people should."⁵⁴ To this kind of argument the government replied that their aim was simply to regulate and to 'democratise' the use of cars. But even they felt it necessary to add that they did not intend to try to limit

the ownership of cars – the step which the Crowther steering group had thought so redolent of Soviet Russia.

Nonetheless the cautious statements about public and private transport in the transport White Papers were taken as confirming the government's hostility to motoring – already shown in measures such as the 70-mph speed limit, the spread of parking-meters, the increase in all forms of motor taxation, and the threat of a road-pricing system. Most of these merely continued policies set in hand by the Conservatives; as Mrs Castle reasonably pointed out in a press interview: "Don't forget that it was Ernie Marples who started all this road-pricing lark."⁵⁵ But motorists were content to ignore this. In 1967 a racing driver, presenting a petition against the 70-mph limit, was reported as saying: "It makes me vomit, having to kowtow to a bunch of hypocritical socialists." He went on to demand that motoring be taken out of the hands of the politicians, and be decently administered by decent businessmen.⁵⁶ The Tories, with the ambitious Peter Walker as their then transport spokesman, did not acknowledge paternity, and exploited the personal unpopularity which had once seemed peculiar to Ernest Marples.

In October 1966 the Conservative leader, Edward Heath, seemed to give this approach official approval in his speech at the opening of the Motor Show. Having attacked the economic restrictions imposed on the industry, he went on to appeal for "a healthy climate in which motoring can prosper":

Some people would like to push us into a frame of mind in which it is considered anti-social to own a car; selfish to drive one; and positively sinful to take it into a built-up area. Of course traffic in towns creates a problem. . . . My approach to this problem is not to restrict, to hamper or to confine the motorist. Instead we must learn to *cope* with the motor car and to care for the motorist. . . .⁵⁷

These remarks were hailed by the planning correspondent of the *Guardian* as a sign that at last a genuine political battle was developing about roads and traffic policy.⁵⁸ But in the next few years the arguments were not developed. Opening the following year's Motor Show, Lord Watkinson, the former Minister of Transport, merely called for "a positive approach to the motor car age", suggesting that it was preferable to build new roads rather than to impose new restrictions, and to train drivers rather than to punish them.⁵⁹

The Tories' formal policy statements remained discreetly muffled. In the autumn of 1969 the available official Conservative publications touching on the private car included a six-page *Quick Brief on Transport*; this criticised low levels of spending on roads ("the Socialists are giving the motorist less and less value for [his] money") and promised to "continue to build on the proposals in the Conservative-inspired Buchanan Report". A 'Masterbrief', *Transport and Traffic*, reviewed various ways of financing roads and controlling traffic without reaching firm decisions on any (though suggesting that the case for road-pricing had not been adequately made out), and concluded, rather non-committally, that in towns possibly the best solutions were:

- (a) pushing ahead with the construction of ring roads to divert through-traffic
- (b) economic parking charges in city centres; combined with
- (c) special arrangements for residents.

Walker's own statement on *Transport Policy* reviewed the prospects for the electric car, promised an extensive roads programme, which would *inter alia* "satisfy the growing and legitimate demands of the private motorist", and concluded:

... The Conservative approach to city transport is characterised by the recognition of the right of every individual to a choice in his means of transport. If a person wishes to use his car in the city centre, the only restriction that we shall place upon him will be to ensure that, as far as possible, he pays the full cost of his choice. This will be particularly true of the private motorist who takes up road space through on-street parking.

The nearest that the Conservatives in opposition came to making a specific statement on the treatment of the private car was the publication in 1968 by the Conservative Political Centre of a pamphlet, *The Plight of the Motorist* by Geoffrey Block. This was in effect a piece of kite-flying, being presented as the personal view of the author, a journalist and public relations executive with the motor industry. It was said to be written from the perspective of the 'ordinary' man behind the wheel, without political bias. Over the years, this formula had been a reliable guarantee of extreme views, and it was so again. The pamphlet reproduced all the traditional *laissez-faire* attitudes to the motor car, expressed in 1968 with as

much conviction as in the early 1900s. Its opening words were: "Become one of Britain's fourteen million drivers and it would appear that you are immediately regarded as a second-class citizen - a person to be abused, restricted, regulated, taxed almost out of existence, and shackled by a thousand different laws, by-laws and regulations. . . ." The argument continued, in words which echo Claud Johnson's complaints to Montagu after the passage of the 1903 Act: "The politician has always regarded the motorist as a docile milch cow whose shrill cries of protest could safely be ignored as temporary spleen rather than resolutely determined opposition." The pamphlet went on to criticise the raids on the Road Fund, traffic congestion, road pricing, parking-meters, vehicle-testing, compulsory fitting of seat-belts, the 'breathalyser', speed limits and current levels of motor taxation. It is plain that individuals are free to take up positions which are not in practice available for any responsible political party.

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GOVERNMENT AND THE CAR

It is clear that the influence of the motor interests is at least variable and uncertain. Even apart from this, to explain official policy as a whole as the product of successful lobbying would be profoundly to misunderstand the character of British government and the ways in which decisions on policy are – and have been – made.

Two things can be said at the start. First, official willingness to pay attention to the views of the motor-car interests, or even to seek out such views, has never depended on the existence of a powerful motor lobby. In the 1890s and early 1900s the motor industry was small, fragmented and barely identifiable to official policy-makers. Despite this, they went to some lengths to tailor legislation, as far as possible, to the technical needs of the car. Equally, the users of cars were a very small group, but this did not prevent government taking them into their confidence in framing legislation, whether about road safety or about taxation. Between the wars, the motor interests were if anything even more closely involved in policy-making than they had been earlier.

Secondly, one fact often produced as evidence of the sinister activities of a motor lobby is the failure of successive governments drastically to reduce road casualties. It is argued that governments not mesmerized by the industry and the organisations could and would deal effectively with this problem. But it is not as simple as this. Road safety is one of the many sectors where public action and public expenditure are bound in practice to fall short of what would be needed to solve the problem altogether (unlike, for instance, action to prevent dogs with rabies from entering the country). There will thus always be scope for complaints that government and the community as a whole are indifferent to the horrific levels of road casualties. The point is that where resources are limited, any community must in practice accept some level of road casualties as tolerable, in the same way that it accepts, however reluctantly, some levels of crime or deaths from kidney disease. There must be a trade-off between levels of casualties and levels of investment in

better roads, or motorway crash barriers, or rubber street furniture, and where the cut-off point should come must be a more or less arbitrary decision. A thousand road casualties may not be acceptable to a civilised society. But why should half that number be any more acceptable?

This argument can as easily be expressed in political as in financial terms. In no type of political system does the authority of government allow it to do everything it wants. Resources, be they secret police or popular support, are limited, and if there is to be more control of some spheres of activity there must be less of others. To 'nationalise' car design, as Black wants, or to ban private transport altogether, as E. J. Mishan has suggested, might be administratively feasible; but it is another question whether the political opportunity costs, in the sense of other government actions that might have to be deferred, would be justifiable. The political rewards for action to reduce road accidents would be slight. The victims of accidents and their families are politically weak in two ways. First, as members of this 'interest' they have no existence until it is too late; only occasionally do small groups of local residents agitate for action to prevent anticipated accidents. Secondly, they share with other consumer groups the crushing weakness of being evenly distributed throughout the community, both geographically and sociometrically. It is thus almost impossible for the survivors to organise themselves effectively.*

Nonetheless, official policy is not dictated by the producer groups. This is partly because it is really a 'non-policy', due both to specific historical influences on attitudes and approaches to the car, and to general tendencies in the ways in which policy is made in British government.

It is, of course, the survival of the idea that motoring should not be constrained by government which has made governments so reluctant to add new constraints. Higher taxation, stricter traffic laws, more regulation of design and equipment, all in themselves provide arguments for leaving motorists free to choose at least how to use their cars. This attitude has been somewhat illogically reinforced by the idea, originating in the field of traffic law, that mere compulsion is useless; regulation must rest on consent. At the same time, the facts of history are one of the things helping to inhibit the

* Although in Israel there is an association of the parents of road accident victims.

development of new taxation policy; the Treasury's reluctance to explain or justify taxation in terms of anything except the need for revenue has been partly due to their fear of giving any opening to the 'back to the Road Fund' movement. To suggest that tax levels should be related to pressure on road space might wake the ghost of Lloyd George. (Even when in 1965 Callaghan asked the motorists to pay more because of the growing cost of providing for the car, he emphasised that they were to pay more towards *general* revenue.)*

Equally relevant is the fact that taxing the motor car is a very simple way of raising revenue. The demand for motor cars, and for motoring, is highly inelastic; people are prepared to pay heavily for the convenience of private transport (which in many cases is regarded less as a substitute for public transport than as adding a completely new dimension to travel and recreation). Fuel and vehicle taxes are cheap and easy to administer, and the net effect on revenue of changes in them can be fairly accurately predicted. This is one of the reasons why Treasury officials have always thought of motor taxation simply as a way of raising money, and have had little incentive to use it in a more sophisticated way. But if it is true, as it seems to be, that moderately heavy tax increases would only marginally limit the demand for cars, and that motorists would cut back on other types of expenditure in order to buy cars and keep them on the road, it is obvious that increases would have to be very heavy (say £75 for annual road tax) to be effective. Tax levels of this kind, at least in the near future, are clearly politically impracticable.

A further reason for the limited influence of the organised motor and roads interests is that the interests themselves share only the broadest objectives. All the members of the BRF will probably agree on the terms of a memorandum urging the Prime Minister to take the shackles off motor transport or to double the motorway programme. But these are in effect demands for large changes in levels of taxation or of public expenditure and such changes, in a centrally managed economy, are precisely the kind on which governments feel it necessary to use their own discretion. Even in the single area in which all the motor interests see eye to eye – roads themselves – it cannot be said that governments have been persuaded to invest more heavily than the demand for road space warrants (which makes the political arguments for small concessions – as on the noise regulations – all the stronger).

* See p. 404.

On many subjects other than roads, a united lobby simply does not exist. The British Granite and Whinstone Federation (to take a BRF member at random) are unlikely to take much interest, and have no political *locus standi*, in an AA campaign against the 70-mph speed limit, nor the Wine and Spirit Association (to take another) in the SMMT's negotiations about private car design. Probably more important is the fragmentation of responsibility on the official side. The government's relationship with the motor vehicle is spread among half a dozen different departments. The Ministry of Transport has no direct interest in the profits of the motor manufacturers, as Black implies.* The Department of Trade and Industry has no direct interest in levels of traffic congestion in south-east England. The Treasury has no direct interest in road safety except insofar as promoting it costs, or saves, money. Responsibility for dealing with traffic has been divided among the local authorities, whose task Whitehall has insisted this is. (In 1970 the responsibility for London Transport was transferred from the Ministry of Transport to the GLC.)

This kind of division of responsibility is common in most complex organisations, but one of the main features of British central government is that outside the field of macro-economic policy, there exists only the most rudimentary machinery for co-ordinating policy, and still less for central forward planning. The central decision-making body is the Cabinet, whose main task is, as it was in the 1920s or the 1900s, to reconcile the various proposals or counter-proposals which come up to it from the several departments. Consisting as it does mainly of either interested or ill-informed parties, its own recommendations are unlikely to be more than the product of the departmental proposals fed into it. There is, to put it simply, no permanent machinery for asking or for dealing with questions like: "How shall we live with the motor vehicle in the 1980s?" Only where individual issues have been forced up to Cabinet level will there be a 'government view' about the motor car; and, apart from the Prime Minister, there is no central point to which a 'motor lobby' could come to press for changes in such a view. Even if individual Ministers can be persuaded of the motoring case, they are bound by the convention of collective responsibility and the fact of Treasury control, and, except on questions of detail, must convince their colleagues before they can make concessions.

* See p. 367.

The one area of which this is not true is the one in which the motor lobby has scored some successes – local traffic management. The result of insisting that local authorities work out their own traffic plans is, as one Minister of Transport interviewed in the late 1960s admitted with regret, that the motor interests have been able to work quite effectively through the local government structure (where the legislator still has some influence) to prevent restrictions being placed upon the use of cars.¹ Proposals to ban cars from city centres seem to have been regarded as politically dangerous, as likely to be intolerable to those used to coming in by car (although a recent survey in central London found that only 4 per cent of long-term parkers said that if they could not find a parking place they would not make the journey at all).² Local authorities, despite encouragement from Whitehall, have been notably reluctant to introduce 'bus only' lanes, reportedly due to councillors' unwillingness to offend shopkeepers and motorists, and to police objections to the difficulty of enforcing such restrictions. In late 1969 a Transport official was quoted as saying:

We are finding it difficult to get authorities to chance their arm with experimental schemes. There is too much preoccupation with numbers of vehicles, and not enough with numbers of people. . . . Councillors also possibly underestimate the amount of public support for doing something about public transport. The motoring lobby is powerful, but councils may be surprised at the amount of support they get for experiments of this kind.³

In the absence of much firm evidence about public opinion, councils, perhaps prudently, have preferred not to risk being even pleasantly surprised. It has been in every way easier not to try to replace private transport with adequate public services, especially where this would mean running the latter at a loss. To rethink the principles of public transport (how far should it be treated as a social service?) would raise political problems; working out the necessary services would raise administrative ones. It has been far simpler to go along with the current trend in which public transport, in London and elsewhere, has simply fallen back before the encroaching private car. Shortly after London Transport had been taken over by the GLC in 1970 and given the task of making a £2-million surplus, several bus routes were withdrawn or curtailed, especially where they overlapped with tube railways.⁴

The system of roads finance has encouraged local authorities to yield without much of a struggle to the car. As long as Exchequer finance has been available for local road schemes, local communities have been able to avoid the difficult choice between controlling the motor car and paying the full cost of trying to accommodate it. It was only the realisation of the likely limits of government subsidies that compelled the GLC to announce in early 1970 that its motorway building programme would have to be stretched to thirty years.⁵

Local government has notably failed to deal constructively with the motor car. But, as with central government, it would be quite misleading to think of official policy as the creation of an irresistible motoring lobby. It is the product of political caution, administrative inertia (in the sense that existing policy has acquired a momentum which only sustained effort could deflect) and of the sheer difficulty of planning comprehensively and for the long term.

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The structure and style of British central administration have been partly responsible for the failure of governments, after having lived with the car for three-quarters of a century, to take any kind of comprehensive view about its proper place in the community. One by one, individual aspects of the motor car have been brought under government control: insurance, design, roadworthiness, driving instructors. There have been proposals for much closer controls over private garages carrying out official tests on older cars; it is generally accepted that government can considerably affect the prices of cars, and thus their sales, by adjustments to tax levels and credit restrictions; road-building is in effect entirely under the control of central government. But these and other aspects of policy have never yet been brought together.

Another factor has been the way in which some arguments about the car and its use have been still conducted in virtually the same terms as at any time during the previous seventy years. Road safety provided some good examples. The basic questions were still the same as in 1900. Is safe driving best secured by the law or by other means? If by the law, what kind of law should it be and what kind of penalties should be provided for breaking it? In particular, should the aim be to brand the dangerous driver as a criminal outcast from decent society, upbraided for his crimes and heavily punished for them in the common courts? Or should motoring

offences be recognised as what many people clearly feel them to be – mere technicalities – and given more neutral treatment, perhaps through some specialised legal machinery? But if it is felt that for some reason driving cannot be influenced by legal sanctions, what other methods should be used? Many have been suggested: driver-training, intensive propaganda, more research into accident prevention and vehicle design, greater expenditure on improving the road.⁶

Underlying all these questions is the still unanswered question about the relationship between the 'acceptability' of the law and its observance. Motorists have naturally always insisted that, to be effective, traffic laws must rest on the consent of drivers. Though governments have never been able totally to ignore the counter-claims of other groups (as Russell reminded Salomons in 1896), they have generally accepted this view in principle, and have always shown a striking respect for views put forward from all quarters. In Parliamentary discussion of the motor car the normal working of the modern party system has often simply been suspended. Pre-war governments were at times virtually paralysed by the veto of one or more of the interests. Even in the 1950s governments were still chary of pressing on Parliament proposals which were not generally supported by the interests affected by them; they were prepared both to admit ignorance and to change opinions in mid-course, in a way which has long been untypical of any other kind of legislation except perhaps that on 'moral' issues. There is, too, still some life in the idea that motoring is a highly individual activity for which general regulations may not be appropriate, and that it is an activity of which cloistered civil servants, by definition, are likely to know little.*

Legislators have continued to have difficulty in carrying the courts with them. The general contempt felt for the old 20-mph speed limit in its last days lives on in other forms. For at least forty years juries have tended to decline to find drivers guilty of the more serious offences, and magistrates to punish them severely for the more trivial ones. The repeated exhortations from departments, Ministers and senior judges seem to have made very little impact, despite the anxieties expressed about interference with the freedom

* As they clearly were in the 1900s. F. L. D. Elliott, single-handedly urging the motorists' case on his colleagues in the Home Office, was the exception proving the rule.

of the judiciary. Perhaps fearing further interference, the Magistrates' Association in 1967 distributed a list of recommended minimum fines for motoring offences (and were publicly denounced by at least one magistrate for doing so).^{7*} This situation has existed at least since the end of the 1920s, when the detailed statistics first begin. These show that in money terms the average fines for speeding and for careless and dangerous driving have increased quite substantially over the years. But they have responded only very sluggishly when changes in the law have raised the maximum fine allowed. (In 1962, when the average fine imposed for speeding was £4. 4s. od., the maximum for a first offence was increased by two and a half times; by 1968 the average fine had risen to £6. 18s. od.) In fact they have barely kept pace with the rise in the cost of living. Since 1935, in real terms, the average fine for speeding has risen by half, for careless driving, by a third; for dangerous driving, the average has actually fallen.

In the circumstances, a certain scepticism about the value of legislation is not surprising. Governments have made great efforts to find common ground; they have taken trouble both to consult informed opinion and to avoid forcing their own views on Parliament. This was true of the government's approach to the original Bill of 1896, to the 1903 Bill, and to the protracted birth pangs of the 1927 Bill. The consultations, formal and informal, which lasted from the early 1920s until a Bill was finally brought in by Herbert Morrison, marked probably the peak of governmental deference to outside opinion. The exact method of consultation in 1927-8 (circulating a Bill in draft) was probably unique. Apart from this, the place of consultation in the process had changed but little forty years later, when the Road Research Laboratory commissioned a survey to test public opinion about the then experimental 70-mph speed limit; or when in 1968 the Ministry of Transport published a 'green paper' in a further attempt to get guidance on limits. (The RRL's survey† was distinguished from earlier tests of opinion mainly by the attack on it by the motoring organisations, which claimed to see in it an attempt to bolster up an unjustifiable restriction with selective

* They did the same thing again in the spring of 1970 (see *The Times*, 18 March).

† Over half the respondents to the RRL survey approved of the limit. When the AA surveyed its own members, 73 per cent disapproved.

statistics.)⁸ The green paper expressed the official attitude very clearly:

First, the limits themselves must be so set that the majority of road-users have confidence in them. Secondly, respect for speed limits must be increased by a programme of public education, which would publicise the reasons for speed limits and the benefits they can bring. Thirdly, these two must be complemented by enforcement directed against those who refuse to comply with speed limits voluntarily.⁹

Two of the main arguments for trying to adapt law to public opinion are, as always, that 'bad' law is unenforceable, and that attempts to enforce it can only lead to bad relations between the law-breakers and the police. Behind the implication that good relationships are normal is the assumption that motorists are on the same side of the fence as the police precisely because they are not criminals. The Royal Commission on the Police did not accept this, arguing that separate traffic police and courts would create an undesirable formal distinction "between motoring offences and other offences against the criminal law".¹⁰ (A better argument against 'bad' law is that if it is difficult to enforce it is likely to take too much police time and to distract them from more important activities.) The greatest respect has been paid to the relationship between law and opinion throughout the history of the motor car. The Samuels working party, proposing parking-meters in central London, went out of their way to emphasise the importance of not turning motorists against the police. They recalled two episodes which, they said, had threatened to endanger the public's customarily high esteem for the police: the enforcement of the original 20-mph limit, and the attempts to keep the streets clear of waiting vehicles during the later 1920s and 1930s. If meters were introduced

the motorist's feelings against the enforcing authorities are likely to be roused again. We cannot emphasise too strongly the importance of reducing any tendency towards such resentment to a minimum and above all of maintaining the good relations which now exist between the motoring section of the general public and the enforcing authorities, particularly the police.¹¹

Such views also lie behind the long-standing attempts to bridge with propaganda the shadow-area between voluntary compliance and compulsion. Publicity is sometimes aimed at reminding drivers that certain activities are punishable at law. Thus advertisements at

Christmas 1969 appealed to motorists not to drink and drive by pointing out that they would lose their licences if they were caught doing so. But publicity is more often aimed at making up for a lack of legal sanctions or at making it unnecessary to introduce them. At earlier Christmases, before the passing of the 1967 Act, there had been in law no objective way of measuring 'drunkenness' and thus no automatic sanctions, and advertisements ought to persuade motorists simply that drunken driving was dangerous (above all to themselves) and anti-social.

The approach is not peculiar to the road-traffic field. Nor is it unreasonable. To have to rely on the existence of penal sanctions, or on the presence of the policeman, as the only guarantees of good behaviour is not only socially and politically unhealthy, but inefficient. (American experience suggests that vigorous police enforcement of traffic laws has no significant effect on the accident rate.) The search has been going on for years for levels of speed limit low enough for safety, yet high enough to be respected by drivers. The search may be a hopeless one, but (on the assumption that speed limits do help to prevent accidents) it is worth making. Is there a function here for law at all? Motoring spokesmen have always argued against legislating for good behaviour: they suggest that speed limits should be 'advisory', not mandatory, or that it should be left to the individual to decide whether or not to fit seat-belts or wear crash helmets, since most people will drive within reasonable limits, fit and wear seat-belts, of their own accord. But, as has been seen, they have argued just as strongly against requiring people by law to do what they do *not* want to do. This seems to leave no middle ground. But, quite apart from the fact that most preventive legislation is aimed at non-conformist minorities, to conclude that there is no place for the law ignores its creative function. Even in an area morally as neutral as driving motor cars, formal legal condemnation of certain sorts of activity may well influence social attitudes quite independently of the effects of any sanctions provided.

But several difficulties inhere in attempts either to tailor laws to existing opinions or to rely on voluntary compliance. First, there is no wholly reliable way of testing individual opinions, still less of ensuring that an answer given reflectively to a survey will bear any relationship to actual behaviour on the road. This is all the more so since for most people their role as 'motorist' is now quite subordinate to their other roles; in a survey of motorists they are likely to

perceive themselves as motorists and to express opinions accordingly but may well drive in a style related to one of their other roles (e.g. commercial traveller paid by results and anxious to make two more calls before evening).^{*} This was not always so. To be a 'motorist' was once virtually an occupation, and there was then some logic in trying to appeal to the community sense of Automobile Club members, and some force to the threat that continued refusal to slow down when passing restive horses would lead to expulsion from the Club. The idea of trying to appeal to the community sense of the motorist has remained a powerful one; attempts have been made to exploit it both by creating new motoring communities (e.g. those who have passed an 'Advanced Driving Test') and by hopeful appeals to some sense of community possibly already in existence. Thus the Law Society, in their 1965 proposals for dealing with motoring offences, suggested that

those who use the road . . . at once become part of a special section of society. Just as, when members of a professional body, a Trade Union or Club, they are expected and prepared to conform to the rules for the benefit of themselves and their co-members, so must they expect to conform to established standards; and just as they expect and accept expulsion, suspicion, fining or reprimand when they break the rules of their professional body, Trade Union or Club, so must similar consequences follow from breaches of the road code.¹³

This argument by analogy seems entirely to misunderstand the place of the motor car in modern society. As Elliott and Street point out, the notion that driving a car is in any way a privilege is quite at odds with the ways in which people now use and expect to use their cars. Similarly, ministerial appeals for the 'co-operation of motorists' ignore the fact that there is virtually no social basis for such appeals.

Thirdly, whatever part consensus can play in helping to regulate driving behaviour, it is not at all clear that it is relevant to other aspects of the motor car. The main argument for trying, for instance, to adjust speed limits to the motorist's view of what they ought to be is that unless he agrees to observe them it is almost impossible to

^{*} Relevant here is the comparison drawn by the *Guardian's* motoring correspondent between the cautious driving of 'family' traffic over Christmas 1969 and the style of the daily business traffic which in the previous month had been involved in multiple crashes on fog-bound motorways.¹²

compel him to do so. But this argument certainly does not apply in quite the same way to, for instance, parking and waiting restrictions. Here the offender is by definition identifiable and catchable. He can be penalised, whether by towing his car away or by fines, and if these sanctions are severe enough he will eventually be deterred from leaving his car again. 'Unreasonable' parking restrictions, backed by severe penalties, might well be unpopular, but they are certainly not, as the Minister of Transport told the House of Commons in 1953, "unenforceable". Again, there is no good reason in the age of public medicine for relying for information about the health of an applicant for a driving licence on an unsubstantiated declaration by himself (a provision which was first suggested, as an alternative to driving tests, by the Ministry of Transport's Departmental Committee in 1922). To take another example, when in 1955 the Ministry of Transport wished to justify dropping from the second version of the Road Traffic Bill the provisions for vehicle-testing, the Parliamentary Secretary was put up to say:

In a democratic country, the government cannot go further in enforcing safety regulations than public opinion is prepared to support. We believe that inspection of vehicles would make for a reduction in the number of road accidents, but if public opinion is not prepared to put up with the added interference and inconvenience it is clearly unwise for us to try to legislate ahead of public opinion.¹⁴

This anachronistic view of government as night-watchman (the argument might just as well be applied to factory-owners who were not prepared to fence in machinery or to dispense with child labour) is typical of discussion about road safety. But it is not peculiar to this aspect alone of the motor car. Much the same kind of thing is said about the car in other contexts, and here is even more closely reflected in policy.

The first cars inherited restrictions originally aimed at quite other users of the road. Motoring politics for long consisted of attempts, in the long run successful, to have these restrictions removed. The single minor exception of the 30-mph speed limit apart, by 1939 a still largely middle-class motoring public was more or less able to use its cars where, when and how it chose. Government intervened in the motor industry's affairs only when asked to help it repel 'unfair' foreign competition and in attempts to persuade it to export more, if only to the Empire. The Depression did not prevent a

steady rise in car sales; prices fell and quality improved. There was no case for other than a simple *laissez-faire* policy. The only major exception to this was the Treasury's sustained attack on the Road Fund. Even this was in its way less interventionist than the alternative of increasing motor taxation; the vehicle tax on cars did not rise above £1 per horsepower until 1940.

In the very different conditions of the 1950s and 1960s, the motor-car and other roads interests have insisted, in effect, that the conditions of the 1930s were the norm. In 1927 Lord Montagu, commenting on reported suggestions that private cars might need to be restricted in towns, had said:

But shall we ever stand such a denial of individual liberty? If I am right in my opinion that the right to use the road, that wonderful emblem of liberty, is deeply engrained in our history and character, such action will meet with the most stubborn opposition. More street space and more road space will have to be provided whatever be the plan for it or the cost of it.¹⁵

These sentiments have been kept alive by the AA and the RAC, who insist that the private motor car is no longer a luxury, while demanding for the motorists of 1970 the kind of conditions their predecessors had enjoyed in the past, when motoring *was* a luxury. Their demands rest on two related assumptions: that the problem is finite, and that solving it consists in acknowledging (by providing enough roads, and so on) a universal 'right' to own and drive a car. In other words, if only governments would try hard enough the problem could be solved; and, in a democracy, governments really have no option. Statements based on this view are legion: all the appeals for 'positive' treatment of the motor car; the AA's attacks on the Ministry of Transport as 'Canute-like' in failing to provide for apparently unlimited numbers of cars in future; the claim that stricter parking restrictions could be enforced only if other parking spaces were provided; the attempts to prove parking-meters were a failure by showing that they had not made significant operating profits; the RAC's attacks on the 'dictatorship' of local authorities who envisaged distinguishing between essential and non-essential parkers; the motor industry's demands that governments should allow them to sell as many cars as they could produce.¹⁶

The AA declared that the transport White Paper of 1967 (one of the first constructive official suggestions for integrating public and

private transport) expressed "a gospel of defeatism and despair as to the problems of living with the car in a modern society".¹⁷ The committee set up by Marples in 1964 to look at trends in car design concluded in effect that with ingenuity it should be possible to accommodate the car in towns. Their report, *Cars for Cities*, suggested that using existing types of small car, traffic capacity could be increased by 50 per cent and that, using a completely new miniature 'citycar', it could be doubled – but only if there were rigorous separation between different sorts of traffic.¹⁸ Critics have pointed out that this approach is precisely the opposite of that of the report *Better Use of Town Roads*, which recommended keeping cars out through road-pricing. One may also wonder why it should be thought that doubling the car-carrying capacity of city streets would in any way solve the problem of urban congestion. It would simply make it possible for a small minority to enjoy what had previously been enjoyed by a tiny minority.

The idea of a 'right' to private transport, expressed forty years ago by Montagu, has now slipped into common currency. If people want to use private cars, it must be made possible for them to do so. The Director-General of the AA has declared: "The main political reason for building roads must be the tremendous and quite evident desire on the part of the public to own and use motor cars."¹⁹ In 1969 the campaigns of both the AA and the RAC made a lot of play with the idea that higher tax rates penalised the poorer driver, who was thus forced to make 'sacrifices' to keep his car on the road. The AA argued that Selective Employment Tax, by putting up garage charges, forced drivers to economise; they quoted a sample surveyed, some of whom said that if motoring costs continued to rise they would do their own servicing, and others that they would 'skip the occasional service'. From this evidence the AA concluded:

These are the answers of people who are near the end of their tether, and at the bottom of their purse. When the State burdens a section of the community to the point where they will take dangerous risks, risks which could kill, it has gone too far.

Why not repeal this iniquitous tax? It tempts drivers to take risks and threatens road safety. It is a failed and dangerous policy.²⁰*

* A magnificent piece of special pleading (which might after all apply to any kind of tax increase). There is more than an echo here of Stenson Cooke's argument against the vehicle tax: that it penalised the frugal motorist whose economising took the form of running two cars, lest by using a single one all the time he wear it out.

The Crowther steering group, considering the possibility of reducing traffic congestion by deliberately restricting car-ownership, remarked that this seemed to be official policy in the Soviet Union, and hoped that it would never be copied in Britain.²¹

The problem is, of course, that it becomes worth defining rights only when there is some threat to deny their existence – which is usually when they come into conflict with other rights. One hears little about a ‘right’ to own furniture. The spread of cars is a phenomenon very different from the spread of sideboards or three-piece-suites, in that it is followed by a proportionate increase in demand for a scarce resource – road space; and that the failure to meet this demand imposes all sorts of costs, not simply on car-users, but on other members of the community, in the form of accidents, delay, expense and the general deterioration of environment produced by congestion and the indiscriminate presence of cars. Meeting the demand equally imposes financial costs. The question is whether the ownership of a car implies a right to use it (without which ownership might be thought an empty privilege) – or at the very least to use it in certain ways. For many years the question was of academic interest only. Motorists were always prone to see tax increases as attempts to restrict motoring, and insisted that the car was no longer a luxury, but had become a necessity and a tool of business (a claim which government first implicitly acknowledged when allowances were made for supplementary petrol rations in 1939). As long as it was assumed that some kind of limit would be reached at a ceiling far short of universal car-ownership, there was no need to consider imposing artificial restrictions on the use of cars. Even when it started to become clear that there were now so many cars that they imposed their own limits on the ways in which they could be used, it was hoped (or feared) that this might be some kind of self-regulating system.

It could almost be said that traditionally ‘motor car policy’ rested on the principle that government need not have a motor car policy (insofar as having a policy meant defining national objectives and working towards them). Even today the theme of official attitudes towards the car as a product, or as a possession, is that the right to *own* a car is universal. This theme is expressed in taxation policy – or, rather, in the lack of such a policy. Given that one of the main ways in which governments try to direct consumption is through differential tax rates, it might have been thought that the frequent changes (and

often high levels) of motor taxation would have been explained and justified by reference to the need to restrict or to encourage car-ownership. Thus an increase in purchase-tax rates might be declared necessary because of cuts in the road programme, since putting still more cars on to existing roads might result in unacceptable levels of congestion and/or accidents.

Inter-wars governments went some way to doing this. They annexed the motor-tax revenue to help balance their budgets, and did not hesitate to concoct arguments about the use and the general nature of the motor car in attempts to justify doing this. In general post-war governments, intervening much more often to change tax rates, have been careful not to try to justify their policy with arguments about the car as such. If they have had views about limiting the spread of cars, these have generally been suppressed. Changes in tax rates or in credit and other regulations do of course directly affect the numbers of cars that are produced and sold; but no attempt is usually made to justify such changes in terms of, say, an official view about the proportion of national resources which should be devoted to motoring, or about the desirable ratio of vehicles to road-space. Direct taxation of cars has been regarded almost exclusively as a means of raising revenue. (The obvious exception is taxation by parking-meter, which explicitly rests on the view that cars should not be left for long periods in city streets. But even this method, although the raising of revenue was quite incidental to it, was sold to the motoring organisations as being a means of financing more parking space.)

Two separate Labour Chancellors after 1964 publicly expressed what might have been thought to be the first steps towards a theory of motor taxation, but on examination even these remarks turn out to be deeply traditional. When Callaghan increased the vehicle duty for the first time in 1965 he argued that its level had fallen well below the cost of living, and went on to suggest that it was fair to ask motorists to pay more towards the general revenue, given the congestion and social costs attributable to the motor car, as well as the levels of capital investment necessary if it was to be properly provided for.²² The first part of this argument was technically irrelevant, since at least in principle motor-tax levels were related only to the need for revenue. The second part was simply a return to the old Road Fund notion that motorists ought to pay for the mess they made. Three years later Roy Jenkins uttered some equally familiar

cries. Increasing the vehicle tax for the second time in 1968, he defended this in terms only slightly different from Churchill's of forty years before, remarking that private motoring was growing at an enormous rate, and that it was in most ways "a highly desirable but not always an essential feature of life". But, he added, this tax increase could not be regarded as "unduly regressive", since about half of all families did not own cars.²³ In other words, whatever his own or the government's view in principle about motoring – which might imply views about how many people *ought* to own cars – in practice his concern was only with how many people *did* own them. If any of his hearers recalled that he had once suggested that motor-taxation policy should take account of plans for investment in roads, nobody was unkind enough to remind him.

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It seems likely – though not certain – that in the 1970s it will no longer be possible simply to avoid planning for the motor car. If it be agreed that rationing the use of cars by congestion is undesirable because it is so inefficient (especially because the use of every other kind of road vehicle is simultaneously rationed), there appear to be three possible choices for action: the motor car can be accommodated by shaping the environment to suit it, whatever the cost; deliberate restraints can be applied to the way in which it is used; or the growth in its numbers can be deliberately held back until solutions have been worked out (which may mean indefinitely).

It first became necessary to discuss limitations – or alternatives – once the notion was exploded, about the mid-1960s, that traffic was self-regulating (at least at tolerable levels). The Hall group, in their 1963 report on Britain's transport needs for the next twenty years, concluded that although 'on present plans' urban congestion would continue to limit the use of cars in towns, it would restrict neither the use nor the ownership of cars elsewhere.¹ The Buchanan group, concerned with the treatment of cars in towns (some of them arriving from elsewhere), gloomily agreed.²

If this were true, it spared governments one problem, in that the continued health of the motor industry did not depend on a high level of investment in roads. But long before the inadequacies of the road system threatened to choke off demand for cars, they created their own problems which government was forced to deal with. In particular, the fact that there was too little road space faced governments in the 1960s with the need to do what they had so far successfully avoided: to ration it – which meant discriminating between different uses of it. In the late 1950s, when it first became necessary to limit parking in towns, this was done by making a very broad distinction between short-term and long-term parkers; the latter were discriminated against, in that they were no longer allowed to park on the street, without any question being asked as to why they (or the short-term parkers) were bringing their cars into city centres

in the first place. By the 1960s it was clear that further restrictions were necessary. This pushed governments one stage nearer to having to make the kind of judgement which they had always carefully avoided. The problem was clearly seen, even if the remedies were not. In 1963 the Ministry of Transport declared that London's parking restrictions ought to be extended; but in his foreword to the official booklet Marples warned: "Let us be under no illusions. Parking control and traffic engineering are no more than fair and sensible expedients for dealing with immediate problems. They will be quite inadequate to cope with the flood of new cars in ten and twenty years' time."³

Over half the ten years have now passed. Official policy has recognised that there is a place for public passenger transport in the provisions of the Transport Act. But in general it has gone little beyond 'expedients'; the flood of cars is here, but the defences seem far from ready. Governments cannot but recognise the economic importance of road transport. Road vehicles now carry three-quarters of all inland goods, but they do not account for a corresponding share of traffic. The car's share of traffic is out of all proportion to its utility. To take an extreme example, the 1962 London Traffic Survey showed that of traffic crossing the river bridges at peak hours 47 per cent was cars, 24 per cent was goods vehicles, 16 per cent buses and coaches. Five years later cars still carried a mere 10 per cent of all peak-hour passengers.⁴

Governments have been inhibited from acknowledging the importance of goods vehicles and public transport, in the form of action to speed them up, by their reluctance to discriminate against the private car. Their attitude to general restraints on the car seems to have been that expressed, rather excitably, by the Crowther group:

A car-owning electorate will not stand for a severe restriction. And even if a severe restriction could be got on to the statute book, it would be almost impossible to enforce. It is a difficult and dangerous thing in a democracy to try to prevent a substantial part of the population from doing things that they do not regard as wrong; black markets and corruption are the invariable fruit of such attempts at prohibition.⁵

But without some filtering machinery the private motorists will always be the main beneficiary of road improvements. (This is a fact which in their propaganda the BRF and the Roads Campaign

Council, each supported by one of the motoring organisations, have prudently not emphasised.*) Until very recently there was little sign of any willingness to discriminate; it has been suggested that one of the basic principles of practical traffic management has been "all motor vehicles are equal".⁷ In the same way, decisions about where to build new roads have depended on how much undifferentiated 'traffic' there was on existing ones. One of the main objections put forward to the GLC's proposals for urban motorways in London was that the primary aim of these appeared to be to cater for the maximum number of private cars. The London 'bus only' lanes have been one of the few attempts to discriminate, in a limited way, against cars. The difficulty of extending the scheme has shown how far from acceptable the idea of discrimination still is.

The alternative to restricting cars in general is to discriminate against specific uses of the car. The problem here is to decide *which* uses. Traditionally, restrictions on cars have been justified by the claim that cars are luxuries.

The need to be embarrassingly specific about precisely which uses of the car are luxurious has been avoided by imposing only the most general restrictions. As long as parking restrictions were an adequate remedy, it was their beauty that they caught only private cars of every kind, the only vehicles whose drivers wanted to leave them standing in the street for long periods. But there are now so many cars that general parking restrictions can no longer adequately limit the amount of traffic. One of two things must be done. There can be more detailed control over parking; local authorities are being forced to consider operating public car parks as an integral part of traffic management schemes, with public control over charges and conditions of entry. Or there can be control over *moving* vehicles. In both cases it will be necessary to distinguish between different uses of the car, and to decide which shall be permitted and at what price.

The problems of making such definitions are vast. Buchanan identified, and thought it would be necessary and possible to prohibit, 'optional' journeys, while allowing only 'essential' ones. This has been criticised as "too static" a classification.⁸ It also has the same weakness as a distinction between 'business' and 'pleasure'

* Although in a 1965 study commissioned by the RCC, Professor E. V. Morgan did frankly argue that the use made of roads was irrelevant in deciding whether or not they were needed; if 'pleasure' motorists were prepared to pay an economic price for roads, it was the duty of government to allow roads to be built.⁶

uses: that the distinction is a philosophical one and at the margins extremely ambiguous (should a pop group be allowed to drive to a concert on the grounds that this is their business, while their audience must go by bus on the grounds that they are going for pleasure?); that wherever the distinction be made, the business/pleasure continuum is not necessarily paralleled by one of social utility (should the pop group be allowed to drive to a concert, but the brain surgeon relaxing at a theatre after a long day be forced to go by bus?). The Ministry of Transport's departmental committee on taxation had some inconclusive wrangles on this very theme in the early 1920s. The group-authors of *Better Use of Town Roads* acknowledged "the weakness of the proposition that all business use of cars is somehow more justifiable than any non-business use; whereas some business journeys could be made by public transport while some non-business journeys could not" and concluded that the business/pleasure distinction was unworkable.⁹ (It is only to reduce the problem to a manageable size that the argument is usually limited to cars; why in fact should the truck loaded with potato crisps, cigarettes, or dog biscuits necessarily have precedence over the car carrying the surgeon, teacher or Cabinet Minister?)

It can also be argued that restricting the 'pleasure' uses of the car would prevent it from making its most distinctive contribution to the general welfare. This contribution is growing all the time. One of the main effects of car-ownership is to increase the number of non-work journeys made; the 1964 Travel Survey showed that car-owning families made five such trips weekly, non-owners only three.¹⁰ * The 1962 London Traffic Survey forecast an increase by 1981 of only 10 per cent in work journeys by car, but of 74 per cent in social journeys.¹¹ Could any government in the 1970s afford to bring in a restrictive policy unequivocally based on the proposition that 'pleasure' motoring was even relatively undesirable? The growing recognition of the force of the search for leisure is slowly bringing this into the centre of political debate. The problem is of course how to value leisure, and to make a rational choice between building a by-pass at Exeter, to speed holiday traffic, and improving a heavy lorry route to the docks.

Because it is so difficult to draw convincing distinctions between the different uses of the private car, the most popular solutions to the

* 'Trip' can be a misleading unit of measurement. A husband and wife driving to the cinema and back have made *four* trips between them.

problem have been those which try to avoid distinctions: either to cram in as many cars as possible, first by 'traffic management' and then by the 'citycars' approach, in the hope of postponing difficult choices for as long as possible; or to increase the costs to everybody by a system of road-pricing, in the hope that the sum of individual choices will be (quantitatively and qualitatively) socially acceptable.

It has been pointed out that, for all its apparent rigour, road-pricing is simply a modification of the traditional *laissez-faire* approach. It suffers from two related weaknesses. First, the effective financial disincentives would need to be – in a political sense – impossibly high. A simple system would, as many critics have argued, discriminate in favour of the rich and, under present tax laws, of the business user whose costs could be met by his employer or set against tax by himself. An advocate of firmer control of the car, acknowledging that "politicians will be sensitive about the impact of motor taxation on those who have just become, or are just about to become, members of the car-owning group", has suggested that the solution lies in discriminatory taxation in favour of cheaper cars.¹² But the rich do not have to buy expensive cars; unless this kind of taxation were combined with regulations forbidding, say, those with incomes over £2,000 a year to buy cars costing less than £1,000, it would not necessarily have any redistributive effect at all. Secondly, road-pricing merely evades the need for decisions. It would almost certainly be impossible for governments to maintain for long a policy which allowed company directors to drive into city centres while teachers or nurses could not. A comparable problem comes up in connection with parking in residential areas; a temporary solution has been found, but in the end the same kind of difficult choice will have to be made. Public opinion seems generally to support the proposition that in residential areas residents should have priority in parking, and in the 1960s policy-makers agreed to reserve large areas for them in London. But when residents own too many cars to fit in the space set aside for them, the need for difficult choices will arise again.

Does the solution then lie in restricting ownership? Perhaps governments should insist that, as custodians of the national highways system, they are not obliged simply to accept every car that the motor industry puts on to the home market. The objections to trying to do this are both technical and political. It would presumably have to be done through taxation policy; it is hard to imagine government

or trade trying to run the kind of allocation system which caused such resentment in the 1940s. A taxation policy based on a general view about the future of the motor car in Britain and about how fast its numbers should increase would necessarily have to be based on views about specific related points – the ratio of cars to road space, the future rate of expenditure on roads, the place of the import bill for oil in the balance of payments, the optimum size, structure and possibly production and marketing policies of the motor industry. Most of the evidence (e.g. the National 'Plan' of 1965) suggests that in a democratic system this kind of comprehensive planning is still impracticable. It is certainly hard to reconcile it with traditional views about the role of private enterprise, or to see how government could become so far involved with the industry's activities and plans without coming to be regarded as virtually responsible for it (as by the end of the 1960s it had become 'responsible' for the aircraft industry).

The technical objections to keeping down the number of cars, even temporarily, are probably irrelevant in the face of the political objections. It can be – and often is – argued that the motor car has become so central to modern life, and adds so greatly to man's pleasure and convenience, that one of the objectives of a democratic society should be universal car-ownership. Dare a Tory administration, preaching individual self-realisation, restrict motoring in general? Can a Labour one, preaching equality, freeze patterns of ownership at the point where the rich are mostly in possession of cars while the poor are not, or even abolish the private ownership of cars (a privilege enjoyed by the rich for fifty-odd years and now eagerly anticipated by the rest)? In 1970 Anthony Crosland answered unambiguously for Labour: "It would be profoundly anti-democratic for any government to be straight anti-motor car – or to try to limit the number of cars. . . . The better-off classes must not give the impression that they're trying to pull the ladder up behind them."¹³

In short-run political terms, there is a lot to be said for this approach. It is reinforced by all the demands for keeping the motor industry in good health. By the end of 1969 the industry's disappointing performance had led not only the manufacturers, but relatively sober and uncommitted commentators in the 'liberal' press, to argue fervently that it was more than time to ease the squeeze on the industry and to unleash the popular demand for cars.

It was argued that what was good for British Leyland was good for Britain.¹⁴ Such critics did not seem to think it relevant to ask how this hoped-for flood of new cars should be dealt with, whether by building more roads or by more rigorous traffic regulations.

Nor did they suggest any kind of cost-benefit analysis of the various possible strategies. The importance of the motor industry to the British economy, whether as employer (direct and indirect) or as earner of foreign exchange, is undeniable. But does the need to keep it solvent justify *any* level of costs, whether measured in economic or amenity terms? Ought governments to accept that levels of public investment should directly depend on decisions in the private sector – i.e., in the present case, that if X thousand more cars were sold, £Y more should be spent on roads? (Or, as Callaghan put it in 1965, that motor-tax rates should be determined by the costs imposed by the car on the community rather than the other way round?) It might be thought that there was a point at which a reasonable alternative to building more by-passes or destroying more city-centres was the contraction of the motor industry.*

The Crosland approach – just as much as the Tory demands for a ‘more positive’ approach to the whole problem – takes all too little account of the likely consequences of trying to combine anything like present patterns of use with future numbers of cars. The cost of trying to acknowledge universal rights both to own cars and to unrestricted use of them would be very different in 1980 (when there may be twenty-odd million cars in Britain) from what it was in 1970, above all in cities. The critics of the GLC’s motorway proposals put the point with admirable simplicity: “A service which is easily provided for a few people cannot conceivably be provided for everybody.”¹⁶

The problem is not restricted to cities. Although so far it is acute only in cities, it threatens to become even more serious in the countryside at large – because there the impossibility of providing a service for everybody is not nearly so apparent. It seems to be assumed that whatever may happen to cars in towns, elsewhere at

* This has occasionally been argued in public. During a debate on petrol rationing in 1956, Harold Lever expanded on the theme that “this country is using more cars and more petrol than it can afford”, and suggested that it would do no harm if car-workers were laid off and diverted to socially more desirable types of production.¹⁵

least universal car-ownership will allow all to enjoy what was once the privilege of a minority. This is obviously a fallacy. The demand for rural road space will grow hugely on the basis of the increase in numbers of cars alone; but this increase will be compounded by changing leisure habits (especially longer paid holidays) and by improved trunk roads (which will push more cars faster into country districts). Moreover, so far one compensation for the traffic congestion in the South-East and Midlands has been that other parts of Britain are not only less densely populated but have relatively low levels of car-ownership. When as high a proportion of the inhabitants of Glasgow own cars as do in Surbiton (probably sometime after the year 2000), Loch Lomond and Argyllshire will have become very different places.¹⁷

Is the answer then to build more rural roads? When Mark Abrams said publicly in the autumn of 1968 that by 1983 it might be necessary to 'ration' family car trips to the seaside since it would be impossible for everybody to go at once, a spokesman for the RAC said: "Private motorists will be appalled by the gloomy forecast that the years ahead will be even more dismal than now. . . . The RAC intends to continue to press the government to revise its thinking on highways as a matter of urgency. . . ." ¹⁸ This reaction completely misses the point. The real problem of the countryside is not how to get cars to their destinations, but what to do with them once arrived – whether the destination be Brighton front, the Lake District or the New Forest. Between the early and the late 1960s the proportion of holidaymakers travelling by car had increased from 48 to 66 per cent. The enormous increase in numbers of cars visiting individual beauty spots and nature reserves had already in some cases begun to change their character irrevocably (the number of daily visitors to the New Forest – 95 per cent of whom came by car – was expected to rise from 56,000 in 1965 to well over a quarter of a million by 2001). ¹⁹ In such places narrow roads are permanently blocked at holiday times, while indiscriminate parking and driving off roads destroys vegetation and environment – the trend deplored, but not effectively legislated against, by Hurcomb and Piggott in 1930. The solution is almost certainly not better roads; double-width roads and asphalted lay-bys and car parks are just as destructive of environment. The more distinctly unspoiled the place, the greater the need for a fully-planned system of traffic control to keep it so.

In this context, rational discussion of alternatives has barely begun. The Countryside Act 1968 gave local authorities powers to restrict traffic on Crown roads, but there seems to be little immediate enthusiasm for using them. Continuing with traditional methods is much simpler. Public opinion is easily aroused in opposition to traffic schemes; proposals to keep cars out of parts of the Lake District ran into so many protests that they were abandoned.²⁰ Bans on cars also raise difficult questions of how to treat (and indeed how to define) those whose pleasure depends wholly on a car, such as invalids and the old. Traffic schemes are expensive, at least in the short run; the first attempt made to keep cars out of an area of natural beauty (the Peak District's Goyt Valley) was expected to cost £17,500 over two years. They are also complicated; the Goyt Valley scheme involved four car parks, three mini-buses and a system of traffic marshalling.²¹ Public authorities will need to develop some very decided ideas about the value of natural beauty before schemes of this kind become common.

It may be argued that even local schemes to protect isolated amenities are reactionary in trying to deny the motor car its proper place in modern life, and that we have now become so dependent not merely on the car as an object but also on the motor industry, as a creator of wealth, that it would be folly to damage it by sentimental attempts to preserve the amenities of a pastoral society (the usually unspoken argument being that *any* kind of restriction on motoring implies a negative attitude to the car as a whole).

There may be something in this. If the sum of human happiness is increased by making it possible for 2,000 cars an hour to drive to the top of Helvellyn, perhaps it is unduly élitist to want to prevent this happening. If Britain's economic prosperity depends on the continued expansion of the motor industry, and if the expansion of the industry depends on building roads up Helvellyn and elsewhere, to oppose such roads would be to deny that 'economic prosperity' is the major objective of national policy. But the point is that it is open to any community to deny just this. There are real choices to be made, and the fact that they are very large and complex does not make them any less real. E. J. Mishan believes that the importance of 'growth' has been greatly exaggerated. Starting from the premiss that "the invention of the private automobile is one of the great disasters to have befallen the human race", he has argued strongly that the car imposes such diseconomies on the community as a whole that it

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should be abolished altogether, and that it is the job of government to put this proposition to the community, as well as explaining what its detailed implications would be.²²

One does not need to accept all Mishan's arguments to agree with him that it is better to make choices consciously and deliberately rather than by default. It is surely the minimal role of government so to define alternatives that choices can be made in this way. (It is not really very extreme to suggest that sometimes government itself may have to make the choice.) The history of the motor car, at least until 1970, is a story of choices not made, nor even defined, by government – and consequently made by default. One can only hope that this phase is nearly over.

CONCLUSION

Despite all the technical changes made in the car since the 1890s, the developments in the use made of it, and the complete revolution in the concept of 'motorist', many of the arguments about it have remained oddly unaltered since its distant youth. Discussions of speed limits, of road accidents, of the enforcement of penalties and the relationship of these to the behaviour of motorists, have always returned to the same dominant themes. The idea of 'consent' has remained extraordinarily powerful in the making of policy, and its influence has overflowed from the field of traffic regulation into others to which it seems considerably less relevant. Policy has, inevitably, been influenced also by history, but the long dead Road Fund has thrown its shadow after it in providing a political debating point for motorists demanding higher expenditure on roads, and in inhibiting the Treasury from publicly hinting that there might be other justifications for motor taxation than the general need for revenue.

It is hard to show that either motorists or the motor industry now 'make policy' towards the car more directly than they did. In the 1900s both were often consulted (usually through the motoring associations), and sometimes ignored; exactly the same is true today. Despite their greater scale the organisations have found it if anything harder to succeed in their demands; the development of other interests and above all, in a managed economy, of the notion of the government's responsibility to the electorate as a whole, has kept their influence in check. Techniques of economic management are sophisticated enough to allow the government a positive role, but also so sophisticated that the government cannot forbear to use the motor industry as an instrument for regulating the economy, despite the industry's protests. Probably the period at which the motor interests could most effectively influence policy, even if only negatively, was during the 1920s when the government's reluctance to force the issue, even on trivial matters, gave them a virtual veto. The way in which policy towards the car has been made tells us something about the nature of British government in general. The car first came to the notice of Whitehall as a totally unfamiliar phenomenon, of which nobody had any experience (the best that

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could be done was to observe the monster in action elsewhere, as Salomons and Major Tulloch observed it in Paris in 1896). Civil servants and Ministers had no idea what to expect of the car; they were content to rely on outside pressure as a spur to action, and on outsiders for technical advice. Government intervened reluctantly in the 'motor question', as much to silence a distressing clamour as to protect the interests either of the minority of motorists or of the majority of their opponents. In the early 1900s the Local Government Board relied heavily on the advice of the motor interests in shaping the details of policy, but they were even more concerned with the views of their main 'client' interest, the local authorities, and looked chiefly to them in deciding whether action was necessary at all. (Hence the Automobile Club's realistic campaign, aimed mainly at local councillors and police chiefs.) Not every department was so nicely poised between balancing pressures; the main client of the Home Office was the police, on whose behalf the Department deeply resented the activities of the AA and would have liked to see it suppressed altogether.

But of course departments consist of Ministers as well as civil servants. The relationship between them is a political one, not constant but dependent on the pattern of pressures within and outside Whitehall. Civil servants, at least in some departments, were far from neutral even in the early 1900s. Home Office officials did not hesitate to press their views, whether about the AA or about re-organising the Department to cope with the motor problem, on their Ministers. Equally Ministers, if they had the temperament, felt entirely free to resist official advice. Herbert Gladstone, not generally thought of as a strong Minister, firmly rejected the proposal that the Home Office should take charge of the motor problem. Churchill, who could be strong, slavishly followed his brief in turning down trade union requests for driving tests. Long and Gerald Balfour at the LGB repeated what officials had told them quite as meekly as John Burns, at the same department, has always been criticised for doing.

The birth and prolonged death of the Road Fund shows well how the relative roles of Ministers and officials can vary according to the issue and the strength of conviction on each side. Lloyd George as Chancellor was able to create the Road Fund on lines which the Treasury, supported by the Inland Revenue, thought heretical and never ceased to deplore. But putting day-to-day decisions about

roads finance outside Parliamentary and public control – as they were when left to the Road Board – allowed such resentment to accumulate that in the end it swept away the Road Board altogether. Meanwhile the Treasury opposition to ‘earmarking’ tax revenue gained edge and momentum under subsequent Chancellors; it was only Chamberlain’s insistence on sticking to the bargain made by Lloyd George that held this opposition in check. It was easy for Churchill, trying to balance his budgets in the mid-1920s, to exploit the Treasury’s views. He and his officials urged each other on with ever more extravagant condemnations of the wickedness of private motoring and the rightness of requiring motorists to contribute to the general revenue. With his backing, Treasury officials plotted elaborate political schemes for separating the private motorist from their allies, such as the commercial goods interests, and their potential allies, such as the local authorities; at the same time they did what they could to neutralise obstruction within Whitehall from the Ministry of Transport, which they regarded as the motorists’ spokesman (although in fact Transport officials had very different views about the different classes of ‘motorist’, and especially about the AA). The raids on the Road Fund were, in the strict constitutional sense, Churchill’s responsibility. But Treasury officials had been planning them for several years, and by the time he took office their policy had acquired a momentum which it would have taken a very strong and determined Minister to resist. The Treasury modified their hostile attitude to the motorists only when the approach of a General Election in 1929 made it necessary to win as many motorists as possible back to the Conservative cause (an activity in which permanent civil servants were much more openly engaged than they would be today).

The Treasury’s severity towards the motorists in the cause of national economy contrasted sharply with the Minister of Transport’s unwillingness to press them on industrial matters. In the 1920s the unconstructive wrangling of the Departmental Committee on taxation, etc., showed all too clearly what happens when the executive tries, and fails, to let policy evolve by consent rather than imposing a solution of its own. In the 1930s even officials as experienced and capable as Hurcomb and Piggott, still knowing little about the industry’s affairs, did not see it as their job to do more than establish the facts about the effects of the horsepower tax on export sales, and about industry’s views on this. It was certainly not for them to tell

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the industry how to manage its own business. It was unfortunate for the reputation of the pre-war civil service that post-war critics, more accustomed to interventionist government, took so literally the industry's cries of 'We wuz robbed' and uncritically condemned the civil service for what was seen as deliberate obstinacy and failure to act. Much the same view of the proper limits of the executive's role seems to have lain behind the almost mystical reluctance originally shown by the Home Office to press magistrates to be a little sterner with motoring offenders. It was only the total ineffectiveness of Home Office exhortations that allowed them to conquer their constitutional scruples.

War brought with it a very different style. The distinction between the spheres of government and of industry blurred and almost vanished as businessmen, brought into the civil service, helped to operate controls over almost every aspect of industrial production. This interventionist style lasted for some years after the war. In 1945 Cripps could publicly lecture the motor industry on their failure to produce the kind of car that would sell overseas. The Ministry of Supply could insist – although without success – that they should standardise, and could exploit the public's continuing willingness to suffer a little in the national interest by forcing the industry to export up to three-quarters of output. But austerity gradually ceased to be acceptable. The declining share of output exported after 1950 strikingly suggests the evaporation of wartime self-denial. Conservative governments could not hold the industry to their undertakings, and their threats of sanctions proved to be quite empty.

This was almost entirely a political failure. Until early 1953 administrative weapons were available in the form of raw material controls; government simply felt unable to use them. The new problems of the later 1950s and 1960s were both political and administrative. For the first forty-five years of the car in Britain, government had tried to intervene as little as possible in the affairs of the makers and users of the car. Its numbers grew steadily, but the roads system remained more or less adequate up till the war. Even had it been technically possible to plan comprehensively for the car, there was no need to do so, nor to take any kind of view of its proper place in the community. This need was suppressed in the 1940s, since most new cars were exported, while petrol rationing kept the others off the road for much of the time. Only in the late

1950s did it start to become clear that it might not be possible, at least immediately, to satisfy all the demands on resources made by the car.

This realisation was not followed by action. Comprehensive planning – in the sense of trying to maximise the advantages derived from the car by deliberately reconciling demands and resources – was still impracticable. This was partly due to the structure of British government: the policy outputs from the Cabinet continued to be little more than the sum of the several departmental inputs. Equally important, after sixty-odd years of broadly *laissez-faire* policy towards the car, any move to work out a positive policy, whatever its objects, could be attacked as being ‘against’ the car (as the AA and the Tory Opposition attacked the 1966 transport White Papers and Bill). Governments found it easier not to admit to these kinds of views, even though in practice they were often forced to act as though they did hold them. Thus the Labour government after 1966 cut back both on the roads programme and on the demand for cars. But they made only half-hearted attempts to justify these restraints by reference to any coherent policy for the car, or by reference to each other. The result of government’s having no case to present was that the motorists’ prevailed by default; there was no adequate challenge to the view that in normal economic times as many cars should be provided for as the industry could turn out. (The classic example of government failing to explain itself was with parking-meters; the tactic of selling these to the motorists as a way of financing more parking space, rather than a way of rationing what space there was, confused all public discussion of meters for years afterwards.) By the end of the 1960s the conception of a right *not* to own cars was feebly making itself felt; it began to be accepted that there was a public responsibility for providing transport, even at a loss. But to go further than this and to suggest that there might be a case on social grounds for checking the increase in private cars was still to risk being labelled a crank, and an undemocratic crank at that.

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28. Joynson-Hicks to Ashley, 4/2/27: Mount Temple papers; see also HO 45/13770.
29. Mount Temple papers.
30. HA 4 (27) in Cab. 26/9.
31. C.13 (27) 3 in Cab. 23/54.
32. MT 34/59: the third set of basic files.
33. HCD, 15/11/27, col. 806.
34. HCD, 21/12/27, cols. 377-8.
35. Cab. 4 (28) 5(d) in Cab. 23/57; and HCD, 23/2/28, col. 1784.
36. MT 34/59.
37. *Motor*, 14/2/28.
38. *Motor*, 13/3/28.
39. HCD, 13/11/28, col. 707.
40. See p. 249.
41. *Motor*, 24/4/28.
42. HCD, 1/7/26, cols. 1311-2.
43. HCD, 28/2/28, cols. 225-6.
44. Cab. 29 (28) 7(a) in Cab. 23/57; Cab. 39 (28) 1 in Cab. 23/58; HCD, 24/7/28, cols. 1075-6.
45. MT 42/1.
46. HCD, 19/11/28, cols. 1375-6.
47. The Second Reading debate is at HLD, 12/2/29, cols. 527-77. All the motoring organisations' objections to the Bill were expressed at length in this debate.
48. *Spectator*, 3/8/29.
49. Quoted by Ashley in his Cabinet memorandum CP 9(29) in Cab. 24/201.
50. *ibid.*
51. Cab. 2 (29) 1 in Cab. 23/60.
52. Mount Temple papers.
53. HLD, 29/1/29, cols. 801-3.
54. Mount Temple papers.
55. *ibid.*
56. The Select Committee started hearing evidence on 15/2/29. The evidence was published with the report on 17/4/29, as HL 88, 41. I have not given individual references for the extracts quoted below.
57. HLD, 11/7/29, col. 87.

CHAPTER 7: HOW TO PAY FOR THE ROADS

1. T.171/163.
2. HCD, 30/4/19, cols. 191-2.

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3. *ibid.*, col. 240.
4. T.172/1043.
5. *ibid.*
6. MT 49/151.
7. *ibid.*
8. MT 34/26.
9. *ibid.*
10. MT 49/151.
11. *ibid.*
12. T.1/12433/52855.
13. HCD, 23/7/19, cols. 1431-2.
14. MT 49/151.
15. *ibid.*
16. *ibid.*
17. T.1/12433/52855.
18. The whole of the following dialogue is on MT 49/151.
19. MT 49/151.
20. *ibid.*
21. MT 34/26.
22. Ministry of Transport. Departmental Committee on Taxation and Regulation of Road Vehicles in Great Britain and Ireland. *Interim Report*, Cmd. 660, 1920.
23. T.172/1101.
24. MT 49/151.
25. *ibid.*
26. HCD, 19/4/20, col. 82.
27. *ibid.*, cols. 294-8.
28. *ibid.*, col. 302-5.
29. HCD, 27/4/20, col. 1121.
30. MT 49/151.
31. Copy on MT 49/151.
32. *The Times* 27/4, 28/4, 29/4, 30/4, 4/5.
33. MT 49/151.
34. MT 39/37.
35. All on MT 49/151.
36. HCD, 27/4/20, col. 1123.
37. *Autocar*, 13/5/20.

CHAPTER 8 : PROSPERITY AND PANIC

1. H. G. Castle, *Britain's Motor Industry* (1950).
2. *Economist*, 7/2/20.
3. See Castle, *op. cit.*, also Departmental Committee on Taxation and Regulation, printed *Minutes of Evidence* for 21/3/24 (evidence from Ford Motor Co.).
4. G. C. Allen, *British Industries and their Organisation* (1959), p. 188.
5. See Departmental Committee, *Third Interim Report*, 1924.
6. *ibid.*, paras 18-23.

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7. T.171/8.
8. Treasury Committee on Horsepower Rating of Motor Cars. *Report*, Cd. 6414 (1912).
9. See letter from L. Pomeroy (Technical Editor, *Motor*) in *The Times*, 3/1/45.
10. See *Economist*, 30/6, 14/7 and 28/7/25; and MT 39/27.
11. See *Minutes of Evidence*, published day by day, 1923.
12. *loc. cit.*, qq. 1-266.
13. *ibid.*, qq. 267-847.
14. *ibid.*, qq. 1008-499.
15. *ibid.*, qq. 3499-5265.
17. Weir to Ashley, 23/3/23: Mount Temple papers.
18. MT 34/26.
19. *ibid.*, meeting of 5/6/23.
20. *ibid.*, meeting of 8/3/24.
21. Printed evidence of 21/3/24.
22. The whole of this episode is recorded on MT 34/48.
23. *Economist*, 26/4/24.
24. *ibid.*, 10/5/24.
25. HCD, 21/3/28, col. 483.
26. T.171/225.
27. See their evidence to the Departmental Committee.
28. HCD, 13/5/24, cols. 1187-306.
29. *Third Interim Report*, 1924.
30. HCD, 6/3/24, col. 1762.
31. *Economist*, 26/4/24 and 16/10/26.
32. MT 34/55.
33. *ibid.*
34. *The Times*, 17/8/26.
35. MT 34/55.
36. *ibid.*
37. *ibid.*
38. HCD, 24/4/28, cols. 861-2.

CHAPTER 9 : BREAKING A BARGAIN

1. T.160/80/F.2939.
2. CP.1907 in Cab. 24/112.
3. CP.1933, *ibid.*
4. C.54/20 (4) in Cab. 23/22.
5. HAC 78 (1) in Cab. 23/23.
6. C.66/20 Appendix I (7), *ibid.*
7. HCD, 2/12/20, cols. 1490-1 and 1529.
8. MT 49/151.
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. T.160/80/F.2939.
12. MT 49/153.
13. *ibid.*, and T.160/80/F.2939.

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14. *ibid.*
15. *Autocar*, 26/11/21.
16. Leaflet quoted in Departmental Committee on Taxation and Regulation . . . , *Evidence*, q. 5599.
17. MT 39/32.
18. *ibid.*
19. Third Interim Report, February 1922.
20. T.160/80/F.2939.
21. *ibid.*
22. CP 44 (23) in Cab. 24/158.
23. CP 59 (23), *ibid.*
24. CP 57 (23), *ibid.*
25. CP 92 (23); CP 96 (23); Cab. 9 (23) 1 in Cab. 23/45.
26. MT 34/41.
27. This episode is on T.171/42.
28. HCD 28/4/25, cols. 69-70.
29. T.161/284/S.33035.
30. HCD, 4/8/25, cols. 1149-50.
31. T.171/250-1.
32. *Motor*, 17/11/25.
33. T.172/1492-3.
34. Mount Temple papers.
35. T.171/250-1.
36. T.170/1450.
37. T.172/1492-3.
38. *Motor*, 19/1/26.
39. Mount Temple Papers.
40. T.172/1492-3. Clifton-Brown's letter of 19/11/25.
41. T.172/1714.
42. *ibid.*
43. T.170/250-1.
44. T.172/1492-3. Churchill's letter of 10/11/25 to Lt.-Gen. Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston, MP.
45. T.170/250-1.
46. *ibid.*
47. *ibid.*
48. *ibid.*
49. NE 2 (16/10/25) in Cab. 27/305.
50. NE 23 (16/12/25), *ibid.*
51. NE 25, *ibid.*
52. NE 27, *ibid.*
53. NE/10th Conclusions in Cab. 27/303.
54. T.171/250-1.
55. *ibid.*
56. *ibid.* Derby's letter of 6/2/26.
57. *ibid.*
58. HCD, 17/2/26, cols. 2035-82.
59. *Motor*, 2/2/26

REFERENCES

60. T.171/250-1.
61. T.171/250-1, Weir's memorandum of October 1925.
62. T.172/1450.
63. *ibid.*
64. *ibid.*
65. *ibid.*
66. *ibid.*
67. *ibid.*
68. CP 150 (26) in Cab.
69. T.171/250-1.
70. *ibid.*
71. Cab. 16 (26) 1 in Cab. 23/52.
72. HCD, 26/4/26, cols. 1710-14.
73. *qu. Motor*, 20/4/26.
74. Mount Temple papers.
75. Printed in *Motor*, 1/6/26.
76. *Whitehall Diary*, ed. Middlemas (1969), vol. II, p. 36.
77. T.172/1492-3.
78. *Motor*, 22/6/26.
79. *Commercial Motor*, 6/7/26; filed on T.172/1492-3.
80. Petition presented to House of Commons HCD, 23/6/27, col. 2015.
81. T.171/264. Churchill's minute of 1/3/27.
82. T.171/267.
83. T.172/1450.
84. Rees Jeffreys papers, f. 59.
85. *Motor*, 19/4/27.
86. All on T. 171/264.

CHAPTER 10 : SOOTHING THE MOTORISTS

1. CP 8 (28) in Cab. 24/192.
2. CP 72 (28) in Cab. 24/193.
3. HCD, 24/4/28, cols. 861-2.
4. *Motor*, 1/5/28.
5. T.172/1450.
6. *ibid.*, and see *Motor*, 26/6/28.
7. J. Barnes and K. Middlemas, *Baldwin*, pp. 507-9.
8. T.172/1644.
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. Mount Temple papers.
12. T.172/1644.
13. *ibid.*
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*
16. *ibid.*
17. CP 87 (29) in Cab. 24/202.
18. T.172/1644.

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19. *The Times*, 16/3/29.
20. T.172/1644.
21. T.161/541/S.36755.
22. T.161/1066/S.38070, Part II.
23. Cab. 10 (29) in Cab. 23/60.
24. MT 39/134.
25. Memoranda on Certain Proposals relating to Unemployment (Cmd. 3331, 1929).
26. Barnes and Middlemas, *op. cit.*, p. 518.
27. HCD, 15/4/29, col. 30.
28. *ibid.*, col. 74.
29. T.172/1644.
30. *ibid.*, and MT 34/6.
31. MT 34/6.
32. *ibid.*

CHAPTER II : MORE NUISANCE THAN BARREL ORGANS

1. HO 45/10323.
2. Gladstone papers, B.M. Add. Mss. 46096.
3. Select Committee on Motor Traffic, *Evidence*, para. 1243.
4. HO 45/13306/204355.
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*
7. *Economist*, 9/9/11.
8. HO 45/13306/204355.
9. *ibid.*
10. HCD, 11/6/12, cols. 692-3.
11. HO 45/13306/204355.
12. *ibid.*
13. *ibid.*
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*
16. *ibid.*
17. HCD, 15/7/28, col. 594; 10/12/29, col. 290; 18/2/31, cols. 1239-40.
18. House of Commons, Standing Committee C, 7/6/34, cols. 2121-2.
19. HLD, 19/7/34, cols. 835-41.
20. MT 34/14.
21. Ministry of Transport; Departmental Committee on Noise in the Operation of Mechanically Propelled Vehicles; *First, Second and Third Interim, and Final Reports*, 1935-7.
22. Report of the Committee on the Problem of Noise: Cmnd. 2056, 1963.
23. *Cars for Cities* (1967), para. 8.5.
24. qu. in British Road Federation, *Bulletin*, April 1969.
25. HO/45/10125/B.13951.
26. *ibid.*
27. *ibid.*
28. The First Reading is at PD, 4s., 5/3/01, col. 590.

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29. *The Times*, 13/5/05.
30. Cd. 3081, qq. 1613-818.
31. Cd. 3080, paras. 146-150
32. HO 45/10125/B.13951.
33. PD, 15/3/07, cols. 381-400.
34. See PD, 30/7/07, col. 714.
35. Ministry of Transport, Departmental Committee on Lights on Vehicles, *First and Second Interim Reports*, Cmd. 659, 1920.
36. MT 49/150.
37. CP 3597 in Cab. 24/131.
38. HAC 106 (6), in Cab. 26/4.
39. CP 4047: copy on HO 45/12987.
40. MT 34/313.
41. Cab. 43/22 (10) in Cab. 23/30.
42. HO 45/12987.
43. *ibid.*
44. CP 165 (23): copy on HO 45/12987.
45. All these exchanges are recorded on HO 45/12987.
46. Mount Temple papers.
47. *ibid.*
48. MT 34/44.
49. MT 33/172.
50. HCD, 1/4/27, cols. 1577-623.
51. MT 33/172.
52. HO 45/12987.
53. *Motor*, 2/8/27.
54. HCD, 28/7/27, cols. 1627-31.
55. HO 45/12987.
56. *ibid.*
57. Mount Temple papers.
58. *ibid.*
59. HCD, 13/12/27, cols. 2276-9.
60. HLD, 20/12/27, cols. 1165-212.
61. HCD, 21/12/27, cols. 536-9; letter from Sir F. Meyer, MP. Mount Temple papers.
62. *Motor*, 10/1/28.
63. CP 312 (33) in Cab. 24/245.
64. HL 192, July 1938, qq. 3850-6.
65. HL 2, 52, March 1939, para. 76.
66. W. A. Dinsdale, *History of Accident Insurance in Great Britain* (1954), p. 207.
67. MT 34/50.
68. *ibid.*
69. *ibid.*
70. *Motor*, 18/5/26.
71. HLD, 30/6/26, cols. 686-711.
72. They are all recorded on MT 34/50.
73. MT 34/59.

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74. *Minutes of Evidence*, qq. 63-6.
75. House of Lords, Select Committee on Road Vehicles Regulation Bill, *Evidence*, q. 207.
76. *ibid.*, q. 1262.
77. Royal Commission on Transport, *Evidence*, qq. 7141-50.
78. Royal Commission on Transport, *Evidence*, q. 2797; Select Committee, *Evidence*, q. 860.
79. Royal Commission on Transport, *Evidence*, Memo. No. 14, para. 40; q. 4283.
80. *ibid.*, qq. 3043, 3141.
81. Royal Commission on Transport, *Evidence*, *passim*.
82. Report, para. 3(d).
83. Cmd. 3365, paras. 39-40.

CHAPTER 12 THE END OF THE SPEED LIMIT

1. MT 34/8. This is the working file for the Bill.
2. *ibid.*
3. CP 194 (29) in Cab. 24/204.
4. Cab. 28 (29) 10 in Cab. 23/61.
5. Royal Commission on Transport. First Report: *The Control of Traffic on Roads* (Cmd. 3365, 1929).
6. HAC 13 (29) 3, Cab. 50 (29) 8, on Cab. 23/62.
7. MT 34/8.
8. *ibid.*
9. *Minutes of Evidence*, Memo. No. 11, para. 11.
10. *Minutes of Evidence*. I have not given separate references to this evidence for most of the various statements that follow.
11. HO 45/13770.
12. See Piggott's evidence to the Royal Commission, q. 191.
13. HLD, 5/12/29, cols. 931-94.
14. The Lords debates, on several dates between December 1929 and February 1930, are at HLD, vols. 75 and 76.
15. HCD, Standing Committee C, 27/2/30-29/5/30, cols. 1-1503.
16. *ibid.*, col. 8.
17. *ibid.*, cols. 76-8.
18. MT 34/8.
19. MT 34/8. Hurcomb's minute of 10/2/30.
20. HCD, 18/2/30, cols. 1207-12.
21. Standing Committee C, cols. 231-66.
22. Standing Committee C, cols. 393-410.
23. *ibid.*, cols. 430-44.
24. *ibid.*, col. 356.
25. MT 34/8.
26. HO 45/13770.
27. *ibid.*, and MT 34/8.
28. MT 34/8.

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29. *ibid.*
30. Standing Committee C, cols. 554-62.
31. MT 34/8; see Standing Committee C, cols. 656-88.
32. Quoted in Ministry of Health evidence to House of Lords Select Committee on Road Traffic (Compensation for Accidents), Bill, 1933.
33. HLD, 23/1/30, cols. 237-56.
34. Standing Committee C, cols. 693-8.
35. *ibid.*, cols. 698-710.
36. The whole of this discussion is on MT 34/8.
37. Standing Committee C, cols. 375-94 (Clause 14).
38. HCD, 22/7/30, cols. 2105-7.
39. HCD, 18/2/30, cols. 1226-7
40. MT 34/8.

CHAPTER 13: MIDDLE-CLASS KILLERS

1. qu. *Economist*, 15/10/27.
2. *Economist*, 14/7/28.
3. qu. A. J. Youngson, *The British Economy, 1920-57*.
4. *Economist*, 30/1/32.
5. R. Stone and D. A. Rowe: *Measurement of Consumers' Expenditure and Behaviour in the United Kingdom, 1920-1938*.
6. *Motor*, 20/4/26 and 14/12/26.
7. AA, *The Motorist Today* (1966).
8. Cmd. 3640, July 1930.
9. For a concise account of these arguments, see D. E. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain, 1918-1951* (1953).
10. Butler, *op. cit.*
11. Mount Temple papers.
12. House of Lords, Select Committee on Prevention of Road Accidents, *Report*, para. 15 (HL 2, 52, 1938-39).
13. See p. 146, above.
14. Pedestrians' Association, *Occasional Newsletter* (henceforth *ONL*), 6 (October 1933).
15. 'A Solicitor' in *Saturday Review*, 16/11/29.
16. qu. *ONL*, 4 (January 1933).
17. qu. *ONL*, 3 (October 1932).
18. qu. Home Office witness before House of Lords Select Committee on the Prevention of Road Accidents (1938), *Evidence*, qq. 378-9.
19. *ibid.*
20. HO 45/15928.
21. *Daily Express*, 10/10/32, qu. *ONL*, 3.
22. *ONL*, 4 (January 1933).
23. Road Traffic (Amendments) Bill, April 1932.
24. MT 34/13.
25. *ibid.*
26. Road Traffic (Compensation for Accidents) Bill; HLD, 7/3/33, cols. 1041-77.

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27. House of Lords, Select Committee on Road Traffic (Compensation for Accidents) Bill and Road Traffic (Emergency Treatment) Bill, *Report and Evidence*, 1933.
28. MT 34/13.
29. *ibid.*
30. CP 296 (33) in Cab. 24/245.
31. MT 34/13.
32. BMA views qu. in brief prepared for House of Lords debate, June 1933, on MT 34/13.
33. HLD, 7/3/33, cols. 1047-52.
34. Road Traffic (Emergency Treatment) Bill.
35. MT 34/13.
36. The Ministry's evidence (given by Piggott) is at qq. 260-304, and Appendix N. The passage quoted is from an early draft which was not submitted.
37. HLD, 5/12/33, cols. 257-70.
38. CP 296 (33).
39. Cab. 70 (33) 12 in Cab. 23/77.
40. MT 34/13.
41. CP 4 (34) in Cab. 24/247.
42. HLD, 7/6/34, cols. 925-50.
43. Cab. 1 (34) 10 in Cab. 23/78.
44. The figures are given in full in Stanley's Cabinet memorandum (see note 47).
45. MT 34/14.
46. *ibid.*
47. CP 312 (33) in Cab. 24/245.
48. Cab. 1 (34) 10 in Cab. 23/78; Cab. 9 (34) 1, *ibid.*
49. Cab. 11 (34) 12, *ibid.*
50. MT 34/14.
51. The press views are summarised in a memorandum of 14/4/34 on MT 34/14.
52. *Quarterly Newsletter* [henceforth *QNL*], 8 (April 1934).
53. The Commons Second Reading Debate is at HCD, 10/4/34, cols. 167-294.
54. Standing Committee C, 19/4/34-14/6/34, cols. 1625-2254.
55. *ibid.*, col. 1646.
56. *The Times*, 27/7/34.
57. Standing Committee C, cols. 1867-902.
58. *ibid.*, cols. 1951-60.
59. *ibid.*, cols. 2024-6.
60. MT 34/14.
61. *ibid.*
62. Standing Committee C, 7, 12/6/34, cols. 2147-90.
63. See *The Times*, 20/12/68, for protests by the motoring and insurance interests at this increase.
64. HCD, 29/6/34, cols. 1474-9.
65. *QNL*, 9 (July 1934).
66. The Lords Second Reading Debate is at HLD, 10/7/34, cols. 399-456.
67. The Lords Committee, Report and Third Reading debates, on various dates in July 1934, are at HLD, vol. 93.
68. HCD, 26/7/34, cols. 2081-92.

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69. *ibid.*, cols. 2133-4.
70. See J. J. Leeming, *Road Accidents - prevent or punish?* (1969).
71. *QNL*, 29 (July 1939).
72. See p. 283.
73. *ONL*, 10 (October 1934).
74. *ONL*, 7 (January 1934).
75. *QNL*, 26 (October 1938).
76. *QNL*, 23 (January 1938).
77. *QNL*, 20 (April 1937).
78. *QNL*, 13 (July 1935).
79. *QNL*, 17 (July 1936).
80. The AA's letter, quoting Belisha, is in *Morning Post*, 9/3/37.
81. qu. *QNL*, 15 (January 1936).
82. HCD, 22/7/35, col. 1484.
83. See Stenson Cooke's letter to *The Times*, 13/2/35.
84. HL 2, 52 (March 1939), para. 31.
85. HL 192 (July 1938).
86. H. A. Tripp: paper delivered to Institute of Professional Civil Servants, 22/11/35: qu. *QNL*, 15 (January 1936).

CHAPTER 14: THE END OF THE ROAD FUND

1. T.172/1644.
2. A. Nevins and F. E. Hill: *Ford: Decline and rebirth 1933-1962* (Columbia, 1962).
3. *The Times*, 14/12/29.
4. T.161/541/S.36755.
5. *The Times*, 16/12/29.
6. MT 34/55.
7. Royal Commission on Transport, *Final Report*, Cmd. 3751, 1930, para. 269.
8. MT 34/55.
9. *ibid.*
10. Ministry of Transport, Fourth Memorandum, May 1930; and supplementary oral evidence, q. 14241.
11. MOT, supplementary oral evidence, qq. 14312-338.
12. Cmd. 3751, paras. 224-67.
13. T.161/541/S.36755.
14. T.171/287.
15. Cmd. 3920, July 1931, majority report, para. 296.
16. *ibid.*, minority report, paras. 48, 52.
17. Draft on MT 39/68.
18. HCD, 20/6/32, col. 822.
19. Public Accounts Committee, *1st Report*, 1932, paras. 42, 93; Estimates Committee, *2nd Report*, 1932, para. 90.
20. Report of the Conference on Rail and Road Transport, July 1932 (HMSO).
21. T.161/1066/S.38070, part 2.
22. *ibid.*, commenting on Cmd. 3751, para. 255.

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23. Hopkins died during the 1955 newspaper strike, but although thus lacking the customary obituaries, his career is recorded at length in *Public Administration*, summer 1956.
24. T.161/1066/S.38070, part 2.
25. MT 39/68.
26. T.172/1644.
27. T.171/315.
28. *ibid.*, and HCD, 17/4/34, col. 920.
29. T.171/317.
30. *ibid.*
31. HCD, 1/5/35, cols. 379-412.
32. HCD, 21/4/36, cols. 55-6.
33. HCD, 16/6/36, cols. 860-96.
34. HCD, 25/4/39, col. 994.
35. *ibid.*, cols. 1814-48.
36. Letter to AA, 14/6/39, in AA Central Reference Library.
37. For all these references, see SMMT Annual Reports for year concerned.
38. Miles Thomas, *Out on a Wing* (1964), p. 185.
39. SMMT, Annual Report for 1935.
40. Rees Jeffreys papers, folder 21.
41. Personal communication from Sir Roy Fedden.

CHAPTER 15: AUSTERITY MOTORING

1. HCD, 1/8/39, cols. 2167-71.
2. E. L. Hargreaves and M. M. Gowing, *History of the Second World War: Civil Industry and Trade* (1952).
3. Copy in AA Central Reference Library.
4. Copy of memorandum in AA, *loc. cit.*
5. HCD, 18/7/40, cols. 413-4.
6. See for instance HCD, 18/6/40, col. 4.
7. HCD, 22/7/41, cols. 775-7.
8. Ministry of Transport Statement, 19/10/40: copy in AA Central Reference Library.
9. W. K. Hancock and M. M. Gowing, *History of the Second World War: The British War Economy* (1949).
10. HCD, 12/3/42, cols. 1203-5.
11. These depressing events are documented in the contemporary publications of the Pedestrians' Association.
12. HCD, 7/5/42, cols. 1378-9.
13. Record of meeting in AA Central Reference Library.
14. Private communication.
15. See SMMT, *Annual Report* for 1943; *Autocar*, 1/10/43.
16. Hargreaves and Gowing, *op. cit.* See also SMMT, *Annual Report* for 1939.
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APPENDIX A

MOTORING OFFENCES AND AVERAGE FINES, 1904-68

	1904/5	1929	1931	1933	1935	1938	1946
TOTAL OFFENCES ('000)	6.2	215.6	251.3	273.5	400.1	437.9	231.6
AVERAGE OF ALL FINES at current prices	£2.2	£1.0	£1.0	£1.2	£1.1	£1.1	£1.5
at constant (1900) prices	£2.1	£0.5	£0.6	£0.7	£0.7	£0.6	£0.5
DANGEROUS DRIVING: fines maximum	£20	£20	£50	£50	£50	£50	£50
average at current prices	£3.8	£2.4	£3.6	£5.0	£5.5	£4.9	£7.3
average at 1900 prices	£3.7	£1.3	£2.1	£3.1	£3.3	£2.7	£2.4
CARELESS DRIVING: fines maximum	—	—	£20	£20	£20	£20	£20
average at current prices	—	—	£1.9	£2.2	£2.2	£2.1	£3.0
average at 1900 prices	—	—	£1.1	£1.3	£1.3	£1.2	£1.0
SPEEDING: fines maximum	£10	£10	—	—	£20	£20	£20
average at current prices	£3.7	£2.1	—	—	£1.2	£1.3	£1.6
average at 1900 prices	£3.6	£1.1	—	—	£0.7	£0.7	£0.5

Sources: 1904/5: Report of Royal Commission on Motor Cars, Evidence (Cd. 3081, 1906), Appendix A.II.

1929-68: Annual Home Office Return for Offences relating to Motor Vehicles.

Note: No figures are available for the years between 1905 and 1929, and 1938 and 1946. Maxima quoted are for first offences.

1949	1951	1953	1955	1957	1959	1961	1963	1965	1968
283.6	363.9	380.5	446.5	542.7	772.0	896.9	1054.0	1261.4	1472.9
£1.5	£1.8	£2.0	£2.2	£2.6	£2.9	£3.6	£3.9	£5.1	£6.0
£0.4	£0.5	£0.5	£0.5	£0.5	£0.6	£0.7	£0.7	£0.8	£0.9
£50	£50	£50	£50	£100	£100	£100	£100	£100	£100
£6.5	£9.9	£10.1	£11.1	£14.2	£15.2	£16.8	£17.0	£20.4	£21.5
£1.8	£2.5	£2.4	£2.5	£2.9	£3.0	£3.2	£2.9	£3.3	3.2
£20	£20	£20	£20	£40	£40	£40	£100	£100	£100
£3.2	£3.7	£3.8	£4.1	£5.6	£6.5	£7.3	£8.7	£10.5	£11.6
£0.9	£0.9	£0.9	£0.9	£1.2	£1.3	£1.5	£1.5	£1.7	£1.7
£20	£20	£20	£20	£20	£20	£20	£50	£50	£50
£1.7	£2.0	£2.1	£2.3	£2.8	£3.2	£4.0	£4.7	£5.9	£6.9
£0.5	£0.5	£0.5	£0.5	£0.6	£0.6	£0.6	£0.8	£0.9	£1.0

APPENDIX B

MOTOR VEHICLES IN USE, 1904-69

Year	Total vehicles	Cars	Year	Total vehicles	Cars
March 1904	—	8,465	Sept 1936	2,758,346	1,642,850
1905	—	15,895	1937	2,928,828	1,798,105
1906	—	23,192	1938	3,084,896	1,944,394
1907	—	32,451	Aug 1939	3,148,600	2,034,400
1908	—	40,902	1940	2,325,000	1,423,200
1909	—	48,109	1941	2,477,800	1,502,600
1910	143,877	53,196	1942	1,840,400	857,700
1911	192,877	72,106	1943	1,537,300	717,500
1912	245,235	88,265	1944	1,592,600	755,400
1913	305,662	105,734	1945	2,552,500	1,486,600
1914	388,860	132,015	Sept 1946	3,106,810	1,769,952
1915	406,821	139,245	1947	3,515,444	1,943,602
1916	427,974	141,621	1948	3,728,432	1,960,510
1917	341,122	110,435	1949	4,107,652	2,130,793
1918	229,428	77,707	1950	4,409,223	2,257,873
1919	330,518	109,715	1951	4,677,888	2,380,343
1920	650,148	186,801	1952	4,957,395	2,508,102
Aug 1921	845,799	242,500	1953	5,340,222	2,761,654
1922	952,432	314,769	1954	5,825,447	3,099,547
1923	1,105,388	383,525	1955	6,465,433	3,525,858
1924	1,299,629	473,528	1956	6,975,962	3,887,906
1925	1,509,627	579,901	1957	7,483,489	4,186,631
Sept 1926	1,715,427	683,913	1958	7,959,313	4,548,530
1927	1,885,553	786,610	1959	8,661,980	4,965,774
1928	2,038,594	884,645	1960	9,439,140	5,525,828
1929	2,181,832	980,886	1961	9,965,300	5,978,500
1930	2,273,661	1,056,214	1962	10,562,800	6,555,800
1931	2,200,708	1,083,457	1963	11,446,200	7,375,000
1932	2,227,099	1,127,681	1964	12,369,200	8,247,000
1933	2,285,326	1,203,245	1965	12,939,800	8,916,600
1934	2,405,392	1,308,425	1966	13,285,716	9,513,368
1935	2,570,155	1,477,378	1967	14,096,000	10,302,900
			1968	14,446,500	10,816,100
			1969	14,751,900	11,227,900

APPENDIX C

ROAD CASUALTIES, 1928-69

Killed	Injured	Total	Year
6,138	164,838	170,976	1928
7,305	177,895	185,200	1930
6,667	206,450	213,117	1932
7,343	231,603	238,946	1934
6,502	221,726	228,228	1935
6,561	227,813	234,374	1936
6,633	226,402	233,035	1937
6,648	226,711	233,359	1938
3,519	125,303	128,822	1939 Jan-July
4,753			1939 Aug-Dec
8,272			1939 Year
8,609			1940
2,266			1941 Jan-Mar
6,903	146,527	153,430	1941 Apr-Dec
9,169			1941 Year
6,926	140,618	147,544	1942
5,796	116,740	122,536	1943
6,416	124,458	130,874	1944
5,256	133,042	138,298	1945
5,062	157,484	162,546	1946
4,881	161,318	166,199	1947
4,513	148,842	153,355	1948
4,773	172,006	176,779	1949
5,012	196,313	201,325	1950
5,250	211,243	216,493	1951
4,706	203,306	208,012	1952
5,090	221,680	226,770	1953
5,010	233,271	238,281	1954
5,526	262,396	267,922	1955
5,367	262,593	267,960	1956
5,550	268,308	273,858	1957
5,970	293,797	299,767	1958
6,520	326,933	333,453	1959
6,970	340,581	347,551	1960
6,908	342,859	349,767	1961
6,709	334,987	341,696	1962
6,922	349,257	356,179	1963
7,820	377,679	385,499	1964
7,952	389,985	397,937	1965
7,985	384,472	392,457	1966
7,319	362,659	369,978	1967
6,810	342,398	349,208	1968
7,383	345,811	353,194	1969

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